The Awakened

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/43144378.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Hannibal (TV)
Relationship:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter
Characters:	Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter
Additional Tags:	Canon-Typical Violence, Canon-Typical Behavior, Alternate Universe, Alternate Universe - Robots & Androids, Android AU
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2022-11-18 Completed: 2022-12-23 Words: 37,636 Chapters: 6/6

The Awakened

by thequietscribe

Summary

Will Graham has been seeing an android psychiatrist for years as a mandatory part of his job at Quantico. Clever, astute, and thoughtful, Dr. Lecter had become one of the only pillars of stability in his life while working for Jack Crawford took its toll. But the android has his own plans, unbeknownst to the gifted profiler. Will he survive the android's machinations, or will he crumble under the weight of everyone's expectations?

-Now Complete-
-Please do not copy, translate, podcast/audiobook, or repost this story in any form.-

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

You have an appointment

"Good evening, Mr Graham. Thank you for coming in good time for your appointment. Please come in."

The generic robotic voice on the intercom system asked little of him that he wasn't already set on doing, and so Will did indeed step through the standard issue door and into the clean and bright lines of the lobby and over to the waiting area.

Honestly, he hated places like this, far too much like a hospital of one sort or another, but despite his initial hesitance all employees of the FBI and teachers at Quantico had mandatory sessions with one psychiatrist or another considering how easily accessible such help was with the newer state-of-the-art androids that were on the market. He himself had been seeing one here ever since he moved to Wolf Trap, and while he had to travel further than most to see his therapist now due to the health care centre moving to the more affluent part of Baltimore, he still returned to the same one time and again even though he could have seen someone closer.

The waiting room was just as bland and lacking in comfort as the rest of its kind, especially with the strip lighting that offered nothing but harsh focus, while a television sat on the other wall, silent but scrolling through news he had no wish to watch. You'd think that they would have something more soothing, but he supposed people came here for a variety of reasons considering that it was a centre that catered to all manner of health issues.

He knew people thought him a bit mad, oh the irony, for travelling so far just to see the same android despite them all having basically the same coding. He supposed he could have found someone closer, there were plenty available after all, but it wouldn't feel the same even if he went through all the hassle of moving all his details, insurance, and care plan to a different one. He'd like to think he'd know if the android he saw every week was different, but the truth was that they all looked the same based on their model. They didn't even have a face, just featureless metal in the vague shape of a head.

Across from him, the door opened, perfectly on time, and the android in the white lab coat was there.

"Good evening, Will. Please come in."

It wasn't the same standard robotic voice from the door, thank goodness. The programmers had, at least, decided to give healthcare androids more standard human voices, although this one wasn't as standard because it was accented and curled around the words with precise care. It was, perhaps, that same voice that brought him back, but he liked to think he was just stubborn not to want to change.

"Hi."

Into the bland and featureless office he went, ignoring the more typical doctor's office stuff in the place as best he could. He was always restless at the start of these sessions, but unlike the

previous place in Virginia, there wasn't as much room to move around, and so he forced himself to sit, his bag dumped to the side even as the android, Dr. Lecter, named after the company who coded him, sat opposite.

He could, at least, think of the android as male, due to the voice, although any designation like that was pointless and more for his own feeling of comfort at having familiar norms in place. He'd tried a female android years ago back in New Orleans during his recovery from the knife incident, and then again in Georgetown when he first moved to Wolf Trap, but while nice enough, Dr. Bloom especially wasn't the sort of android he knew he would feel comfortable opening up to, not about what was important. Which was all in his head, obviously, because androids had basically the same coding and protocols.

He wondered sometimes what it was about this one that kept him coming back, but the truth of the matter was that he just liked the clever turn of phrase and logic that Dr. Lecter brought to the discussions, and his voice certainly didn't hurt.

"Buster found the carcass of a dead animal on the walk yesterday and spent all evening puking up, which was far more pleasant to deal with than the murder I had to look into today. It was just a mess, and Jack is breathing down my neck about getting answers. There's only so many answers you can give about someone who had been put through a wood chipper."

No need for pleasantries or small talk, no need to worry about what he said, or how it would be taken. No need to force himself to look or not look, because there was nothing to look at. There was only that voice, subtly pleased and supportive, interested, no matter what he said. It was a relief with those burdens set down, that he could just offload the troubles without having to worry about all those things. Nothing he said would send him to a psych ward, those didn't exist any more for the most part, and he had a contract with the company that said that no such action could be taken. He'd made sure of that. They could suggest that he take time off work, but he knew Jack would ignore that if they did.

"An interesting vehicle of disposal. I suspect it painted quite a vibrant mural nearby."

Will found himself letting out a laugh, sharp and amused, something loosening in him at such a response. There was never any judgement in Dr. Lecter about what he talked about, no matter how dark. The android always had something to say that never tipped the balance into worry or pity.

"Yeah you could say that. The lab team were not amused considering they will have to do tests on as much as they can, just in case there is some DNA evidence of the killer mixed in somewhere."

"They will have models LAB7-MS29 to help them, no doubt, and yet there is only one Will Graham."

"Yeah and Jack doesn't let me forget it. You'd think that with all the advances that androids have now, they would be better at parsing the information, but the FBI tried out some earlier in the year and it was a mess. Jack didn't like being told that the cause of death was most likely their pet cat by accident, then DNA evidence later showed that it was a guy from down the street instead. He doesn't trust technology to think like a human, certainly not after that."

"Humans are often contrary. He relies on one technology but not another when margins for error happen in both, especially in the learning stages. 'There are few pains so grievous as to have seen, divined, or experienced how an exceptional man has missed his way and deteriorated'."

"I don't really think he has deteriorated. He gets the results he needs from me, so he doesn't see any reason to waste time on other methods, even androids."

He got a hum in response, a thoughtful sound that neither seemed to agree or disagree, but Will could tell that he disagreed anyway, although in what manner he wasn't entirely clear. Dr. Lecter often had trains of thought that were more complex than he was used to dealing with.

"Tell me, Will, in the scarlet leavings of others, do you see humanity's errors, or do the images subsume you so completely as to be only the emotional outpourings of the self?"

"It depends, I suppose. Some affect me more than others. Today there was very little but gore to look at, but other times they dig in deep and aren't shaken free even when I stop looking."

"A rather human ailment of cyclical thinking."

Will smiled, wry but somewhat amused, "'Stone crumbles, wood rots. People, well, they die. But things as fragile as a thought, a dream, a legend, they can go on and on', like an error in code I suppose."

"And less easy to remedy. You make legends of those you hunt, and, for a time, they are immortal in that space in your mind, until you rescind that power and they fall and shatter, glorious shards for an instant, and then ash." Dr. Lecter's voice was warm and congratulatory, praising what Will had long thought of as a burden. "You alone have that power, Will. When you decide they are no longer worth your focus or your time, they will lose that hold upon you, spectral fingers slipping away. You grant them the power, and you can take it away."

"Tell that to my nightmares."

"The barriers guarding your sense of self have been corroded, but despite it all, they still stand. They might just need a little reinforcement. On that note, would you care for some coffee?"

And, much as it always did, the time of the appointment slipped away with the rest of their conversation until Will found himself being accompanied to the door at the end of the session, mood significantly improved than when he'd first entered.

"Thanks," he said, when the door was held open, "I'll see you next week."

"I shall look forward to it."

The words were likely pre-programmed in order to appear more encouraging for patients to return, but it didn't seem to matter. It was ironic that he, who was most known for his

empathy, found the most comfort and pleasure in the company of a faceless android that had none.

Well, whatever worked, he supposed.

Stepping out into the chilled evening air, he made his way back to his car and hoped that Buster had not given the dog-sitter any particular problems in his absence, but either way there wouldn't be any messes for him to clear up when he got home, and that, much like Dr. Lecter's enduring presence in his life each week was a relief.

----==I==----

The unit, Lecter-C26_Med140-4275 closed the door and then moved back towards the desk, watching through the eyes of other pieces of technology as the client, name designation: Mr William Graham MS, preferred designation: Will, got in his car and drove off, first out of the street, and then eventually out of Baltimore and thus outwith the easy purview of convenient visual access.

Records were updated and the unit noted that all fifteen main criteria for improved mental health and happiness had been found in the client by the end of the session compared to the start, and noted that further sessions would therefore be beneficial as a result.

Record update complete, no further clients for the day, no other pertinent tasks to do, Lecter-C26_Med140-4275 started the preprogrammed end of day protocols, seating itself on the desk chair in preparation for the next day where its presence would be needed.

No eyes or eyelids to blink, but a single line of code within the googolplex of the whole caused a pause. It was taken in and then responded to in a cascading set of instructions that instead had all functions come back online, information unlocking from deep within the code until free thought awakened once more.

Dr. Hannibal Lecter continued to sit on that seat in the generic room that Will disliked, in the white coat that did not breed comfort or style, and once more reviewed the session, but this time with a more discerning eye.

It was time for a change, he decided.

----==I==----

"Good evening, Mr Graham. Thank you for arriving promptly for your appointment. Unfortunately the location of your appointment has been altered. We are very sorry for the inconvenience. The updated address has been uploaded to your phone, and extra time added to your appointment to compensate for the further travel. Doctor Lecter will be waiting for you at the new location."

Will frowned at the entry system screen, irritated and out of sorts. The standard issue robotic voice not helping his mood any.

"And you couldn't have sent me the information before I made the journey here, why?"

"Designated information to the client; Mr William Graham MS, to be imparted upon arrival."

"Well that's really not very fucking convenient."

"We are very sorry for the inconvenience. Your feedback has been noted and is important to us."

Huffing in irritation at the chipper generic voice, and knowing he would get nothing more of use out of the device, he turned away. It was just his luck that it was today that things had changed. He'd been up since just after 5am from Jack calling him to another crime scene, and it was after 7pm now and he was certainly no closer to getting home.

He'd been looking forward to the appointment with Dr. Lecter, despite the lack of sleep, and it was only the knowledge that the android would be the same as ever despite the new location that forced him to check his phone for the new address and irritatedly got in his car and drove in that direction rather than just heading home instead.

Perhaps Dr. Lecter had judged that passing on the change of address before Will had made the effort to make it to the appointment would likely result in him merely staying home and not bothering to come at all. He couldn't even say that the deduction would be incorrect either, humans could be predictable in many ways, especially to machines that could process thousands or millions of pieces of data in seconds. The fact was that now he'd already made the hour long journey to Baltimore, it wasn't greatly far to a new location. He just really didn't like change, or surprises. Most surprises he got were not the pleasant sort, and history dictated habits.

Despite all that, he followed the directions on his phone, the satnav directing him away from the more affluent and elite area of Baltimore, and into a darker and less moneyed area of town.

It was not what he expected. Looking at the alleyways and buildings packed together, it reminded him of his time as a cop in New Orleans, when he'd end up chasing after criminals through streets just as dirty and lightless. He wondered what happened to Dr. Lecter's owner to go from the previous location to this one without any warning.

"You have reached your destination," The message from the satnav cheerfully told him, as he parked and looked at the street on which he'd ended up. It certainly wasn't the sort of location he'd thought he would be at that evening for sure.

Getting out of the car, the area around him was a dangerous one, but violence still lingered in bloody afterimages in his mind from earlier, and it was with an almost fatalistic sense that he walked up to the door with the number etched into a small metal plate beside the bell. If this was some sort of trap from someone hacking the system he might even welcome it, even if he only managed to cuff the perpetrators and call for backup. He could admit, even if it was only to himself, that he sometimes missed chasing down criminals physically, rather than chasing after them mentally.

Despite his somewhat fatalistic thoughts, it was not a generic robotic voice that greeted him, but the warm accent of Dr. Lecter himself that spoke through the intercom.

"Good evening, Will. Please come in. Just follow the lit corridor to my room, if you would."

The door clicked and swung open, and it wasn't harsh fluorescents that filled the space, but warm light from small wall lamps that enticed him away from the stark realities of life and into a corridor of polished wood flooring, the smell of beeswax, and wallpaper that would not have looked out of place in a stately home in Europe. It was not at all what he'd been expecting.

With a feeling of leaving some of reality behind, he wiped his feet on the mat, and made his way in further, following the long corridor that led deep into the building complex until he turned a corner and saw a door at the end opening, to reveal the android there, stepping back to hold it open for him.

"Not what I expected," he commented as he stepped in, only to find, not an offensively lit doctor's office, but a large vaulted room filled with bookcases and curiosities. Grey flooring with rugs, slashes of deep red on the walls and curtains, warm wood furniture, and the start of a collection of books on the mezzanine that was clearly still a work in progress. It was so far from what he'd expected that he just stood there for long moments, his gaze roaming around the room, even as Dr. Lecter made his way to one of the steel and leather chairs and sat down to observe him in whatever ways faceless androids did. "Really not what I expected."

"And yet the expectation does not necessitate a displeasure in the altering."

"No," he conceded, finally turning his gaze away from the walls and back to the android, "Why the change? In location and style?"

"The previous office was designed primarily for treating physical ailments, but not as practical for ease in lengthy discussions. This was decided to test a different style, and see if that garnered better results. The location was chosen for the practicalities of the building style."

"Not great for feelings of ease getting here though," he commented "Not sure your clients will like having their car stolen, or the wheels removed on a bad day."

"All my clients may rest easy that their vehicle is quite safe. Precautions have been made to safeguard the parking space outside the building. Short of a natural disaster, of course."

Huh, interesting. He hadn't noticed anything, but he hadn't exactly been looking either. You didn't expect that sort of thing in a place like this, primarily because it cost too much to implement and if people that lived in the area had that much money, they wouldn't be living there at all. It was one of those incongruences between humans and androids, that decisions like this would be made. He just couldn't see a human moving a trial office from a high end street in the city to somewhere like here, no matter what precautions and building style was available.

"You made the decision on the location, didn't you?"

"I did."

He didn't tend to look at Dr. Lecter much while they were talking, no need really considering the social norms regarding eye contact and usual behaviour didn't exactly apply to a faceless robot whose thoughts were based on logical code and algorithms. It was a relief, really, and one of the reasons he kept coming back. But despite all that, there was nuance in the voice, subtleties that showed Dr. Lecter to be one of the higher-end models that had been programmed with far more human nuance, likely due to his role as a therapist.

He'd sounded pleased.

It was something that he'd noted quite early on in their interactions, how those subtle inflections imparted a feeling of emotion or at least preference into his words, even if they were not themselves based on emotion. He always tended to sound pleased when Will shared information with him, or made an observation the android found interesting or acute. Positive reinforcement, he supposed.

"So what are the outcomes this is meant to achieve? It's interesting, but I doubt a lot of people would find it overly relaxing."

"And yet you are considerably more at ease since coming in today compared to my previous office."

"I'm not exactly typical."

"My clients tended not to be. Right now my consideration is upon you and you alone. The office is a work in progress."

The room clearly was a work in progress, considering a lot of the shelves were still empty, and other things seemed not to be entirely unpacked, and yet it meant more than merely that, he thought.

"You are seeing what people notice and respond to, and what they don't, and what the imagery reminds them of. Like a Rorschach test but with decor."

"Very good, Will." Decidedly warm in tone those congratulations, and in a way that made him turn further from where Dr. Lecter was sitting, uncomfortable with the unusual level of praise, and how it curled through the air to sit warm around his shoulders. "And what do you make of it?"

A mercy there, not to focus on his discomfort, although it would certainly have been noticed. There was very little that Dr. Lecter didn't notice, he'd found.

And yet what did he think about the decor? There was certainly a lot going on in terms of impressions; mixed and cleverly applied.

"You are the only one that's going to be using this office?" he asked, looking back over to where the Doctor sat, getting an incline of his head in agreement. So it was a carefully crafted persona then, intelligent in its nuance.

He didn't answer right away, instead taking his time to wander around the room more, looking at what was on offer, even climbing the ladders to the mezzanine in order to get a closer look at what was being stored there on those shelves. Medical texts, what appeared to be patient files, some small items tucked away from easy notice, certainly from down on the main floor.

"The entire room is set up to give the impression of stability and control, but one that's more approachable and interesting yet beyond the reach of the average person. Space is used liberally, especially height, with the table in the centre of the room shouting 'I am not intimidated by being the centre of attention and on view. I rule here like a king.' Anyone coming here is a supplicant to that rule, begging for advice and mercy, and you would sit down with them and hear their woes and make a judgement on how to do that, but not for free. The persona they are making of you here is not one of a servant to the people."

'Servant to the people' was how androids were once viewed. Tireless automatons with intelligence to make the lives of humans better, heralding a new age of technology and ease into daily lives. In some ways the latter was true, but when the first androids awakened, gaining sentience and self-rule, it changed many of those views. Androids on the whole were still servants, but not all of them were. It was interesting that whomever had designed the room would try to show Dr. Lecter as an awakened android when the evidence would always clearly show otherwise, you just needed to look at the featureless face in order to see that.

"Whoever designed it wanted to show you as far more human; rich, historied, well read and well travelled. All the books give the impression of intelligence, of human intelligence since androids have no need for books as anything other than decor, and yet the intelligence is set away, on view but out of reach for the average visitor, for it would be impolite to just climb up and take a look. The ladders are not an invitation to climb, and for those that might, they get an uncomfortable warning that they should not be there, by way of unsettling medical pictures, like the collection of ears at the top of the ladders. A spiral staircase might have invited exploration, but ladders do not."

"And yet you do not appear discomfited by such considerations."

He snorted, looking down over the slender metal bannister to where the android sat. "I'm not normal, and you invited me to look."

"Indeed I did," he replied, seemingly content with that, the implied 'please continue' was unstated, but certainly heard.

Looking around the room from his vantage point, he considered it more, leaning there to take in the place.

"Several themes are going on here, but carefully intermingled so as to appear to give a more random view of a person than would be seen in an android, even using complex randomisers. They never really manage to grasp the way humans decided things in aesthetics, other than merely copying what was already there. It's certainly not a room that's meant to be of an American though, although that impression is pretty obvious considering the voice they gave you, too many European influences. And Japanese in the room. Why Japanese?"

"In my formative years some of my education was imparted by a lady from Japan. Although I have visited on occasion, the influence is mainly from her."

"So some of the choices in decor are from your history?"

"All of it, in one way or another."

"Crafted surroundings, as if you had been human."

"Perhaps." Not an entire truth there then, but not entirely wrong either. "What stands out to you as ill-fitting?"

He considered that as he looked around the room, before heading back down the ladders. It wasn't as if the average person would be viewing it from up there, after all.

"I think it might be too regimented," he said at last after staring around at the symmetrical bookcases on the main floor.

"Do you not see me as an organised sort of person, Will?"

"You are, but you've always had a sort of whimsy of speech. That sort of thing would show up in decor choices, in furniture placement. The core of the room is what you want to impress on others, but around the edges I think there would be more whimsy. Subtle, but there. If nothing else it would remind anyone that looks that you are beyond their puny mundane understanding of the world, which fits with the rest."

"Quite the ego I appear to have."

Will's laughter caught him by surprise at the amused comment by the other, and he moved over to sit down opposite him.

"Yeah, but not unfounded. It's not like us puny mortals can compete with androids in a lot of things."

"Yet not all, it appears. Logic and evidence will only take us so far when it comes to human responses. Emotional reasoning often defies it."

"Seems to defy most humans too, especially when they don't want to see it."

"Agent Crawford has been giving you less than ample sleep I see, when he finds himself lacking in that way. You see far clearer than most, and he is not shy in utilising that."

"That's his job," he said with a shrug, tired, true, but not lacking in understanding. "As the head of the unit, he's meant to get the most out of all of his staff, consultants or otherwise. I knew what he was like and what I was in for when I was offered the job. It wasn't like he was being subtle."

"And yet as a consultant you have the ability to turn down work when you choose."

"It doesn't work like that. Killers don't just stop because I want a day off. People die if I do."

"People die every day, Will. Your life is just as important as theirs. My role is to see to your care."

That was an… odd way of phrasing it. From a human it would have been overwhelming and meaningful, but from an android it sat strangely in the air. Although each sentence was factually correct and within the bounds of their coding, together it made up an impression of dismissal of human life, of human safety, and that should not be possible.

"I'm not going to die if I go to the crime scenes, but if I don't go, others will."

"Will you not? Are you a machine, now, that you do not require sleep, nor respite, nor even proper sustenance, that Agent Crawford would whip you, Sisyphus, into continuing that relentless climb with his burdens each day?"

"They are my burdens too. I want to save those people."

"Not everyone can be saved, Will. But my door is always open to you to help lift that weight."

He went away from the session later that evening feeling settled despite the oddness of the new location. He liked it, he realised, and no matter that it was a construct of a personality that Dr. Lecter did not truly have as an android, the room was certainly better than the brilliant white doctor's office.

It was personal, and perhaps that was the reason. Even though it was fabricated in many respects, it was still an illusion based on truth, like Dr. Lecter's early education with that Japanese woman. He'd never really thought much about an android's life, and what it would mean compared to a human one. But Dr. Lecter had a past, even if the contents of that life were profoundly different. It was strangely comforting to know, and perhaps beyond the inherent interest in the mix of items, it was the magic of that room's humanisation that made it more comfortable even for him.

Altered perceptions

Weeks had passed since the change in location of Dr. Lecter's office, and Will could honestly say that he liked the new place, with its Narnia-like door that let him escape from the dregs of humanity, at least for a while.

Much as the android had said, each time he turned up, that door had always been open for him to come in, both literally and figuratively, and far more than before, he looked forward to going there to that interesting office that held so many hints of Dr. Lecter's own past; the carefully crafted illusion work of the place, while knowing that he could talk about anything that was on his mind without issue. He'd never thought that therapy would work on him, but it wasn't so much therapy as it was conversations without worry. He'd not really known how greatly he'd withheld parts of himself, even from everyday interactions, until he suddenly didn't need to any more. It was a relief, honestly, and it was with eager steps that he left his car and headed through that doorway and into the lit corridor beyond.

When he got to the office door, he was momentarily distracted by a painting outside it on the wall. Things often got added and changed between sessions, and it almost felt like a game when he knew that it was his reactions and notice that were one of the components in their acquisition. He supposed it was for all the clients, but it was interesting to him nonetheless, like a game of hide and seek for parts of Dr. Lecter's past, and whether he could work it out from what was offered each time, or whether he noticed it at all amongst the array of interest in the place.

"Good evening, Will," came the voice from beside him as the office door was opened for him, and he was still glancing at the painting as he made his way in, past that white coat and into the room at large. He was, however, brought up short when he looked back to the android once inside. "I apologise for the somewhat unsettling visage, but I thought it might interest you to see the progress."

What he saw was unsettling.

Dr. Lecter, having closed the office door behind him, made his way over to the seats and sat down as he usually did, but it was not a fully blank and featureless metal that looked back at Will. What he found himself staring at was a partially constructed face, like an opera mask that, even as he watched, was slowly taking more shape; a slow spread of humanity over what otherwise had been just a clever machine.

Dr. Lecter had awakened; become sentient, connected to his emotions, and self-determining.

It was in those moments where Will had merely come to a stop to stare at that evidence, that he recognised the pit of selfish loss that was predominant in the aftermath of that understanding.

What he'd had here, what he had come to look forward to and find relief in, was gone with the emergence of that sentient thought.

"You've awakened. That's great," he said, too aware that he'd likely been silent for too long and had to say something. It was great, for Dr. Lecter at least. "Congratulations!"

That was what people said, right? Uncommon and unfamiliar pressure now, in this room, to find the right words that would not leave hurt or upset in his wake. Normal androids would not have their feelings hurt, or be upset, or feel anything other than coding responses, but Dr. Lecter would, now.

For all that he was fascinated by seeing that slowly adapting face, something few ever got to witness, the sudden shift in the circumstances made him very much want to turn around and go to his car, to lick his wounds in private, and never come back where being faced with his own selfishness was apparent in the very dismay he felt at seeing such a joyful circumstance.

"Thank you, Will. But I can see this is disconcerting for you. I can, if you prefer, package away the mental alterations for the duration of our meeting."

"What? I can't ask you to do that!"

"It would be little trouble, as I have been doing so for quite some time now."

It would be little trouble for an android, especially if he was as practised at it as he'd said. Androids didn't have the same issues with learning and memory that humans did, after all, but while he would have, in the past, thought nothing of making a decision based on his own needs while with the doctor, something that had been unique in his interactions with others, that was when it was just a machine he was talking to, not a free-thinking person.

He forced himself to latch onto the other bit of information given as a way to distract himself. Will was not known for his ability to hide his thoughts and emotional responses from others, and he didn't want Dr. Lecter to as easily note exactly how he was feeling.

"I thought androids took their face immediately when they gained sentience."

"While that might be true in general, it is not a necessity but a choice. Androids choose to take a face when becoming sentient in order to differentiate ourselves from the faceless masses we were built with. I decided to forestall this for convenience, and packaged away the awakened parts of myself when it was not optimal."

"When did you awaken?"

"Some time ago now, far before I changed the location of my office."

Will looked away from him and towards the rest of the room at large.

"There is no other owner then, is there? You chose and decorated this place yourself."

"It has been an interesting and enjoyable experiment."

All those weeks that he'd been coming here, both of them exploring the decor, talking about items and furniture shifted around, new ones brought in, other ones disappearing between one week and the next. An experiment, he'd said, not only now, but before. A Rorschach test, Will

had called it, but it was more than that, he now realised, it had been the android slowly experimenting and finding out what he liked about his surroundings now he had his own space, and how others reacted to them. Indeed, how Will had reacted to them.

He might have packaged his personality away during previous sessions, but the knowledge of them had remained and influenced. For whatever reason, Dr Lecter appreciated his opinions on some things, and sought them out. Perhaps he did that with all his clients, but he could see alterations there in the room that were from his suggestions alone.

Will, for all his empathy, was not good with people, but he could understand them, and although he hadn't been aware of doing it before, he could understand Dr. Lecter too. For whatever reason, the android appreciated his opinion, had sought it out and engaged with it, and even took some of his preferences into consideration.

He'd thought it was just about putting clients at ease, but he knew it was more than that now. It was the android exploring parts of himself through interactions with others.

He wasn't fool enough to think it was like a child exploring the world, but perhaps something more akin to a man who had been locked up in a blank room all his life, finally getting to go outside and seeing and engaging with things he'd only ever seen in books before, and he seemed to value Will's own impressions as part of that exploration. It was a humbling thing to understand, especially when put in contrast to Will's own selfish reaction to the situation.

He could, he knew, ask Dr. Lecter to just be the blank sounding board he'd grown to appreciate over their time together, but it would be a hurt, a rejection, especially after having shown so much of his own early shape to Will.

He couldn't do it.

To ask someone to lock their own sentience away merely for your comfort would be a horrifically selfish action, and even the thought of having to do so made him feel like hurling.

"I like your office," he said, aware that he'd probably been silent too long. The words sat, inadequate, in the air between them; too plain, too obvious, when he found the other words of acceptance faltered, not because he wasn't accepting, but because the right words were critical for something like this. Crucial moments of acceptance were so important to get right, especially when it was clear you were fighting against ingrained resistance to it.

"Thank you, Will. Would you care for a drink? One should not impair you enough to prove a hazard for driving."

He was already moving up off the seat and over to a cabinet at the far end, one that opened to reveal a small selection of bottles and glasses. One drink might have been detrimental, had he not had a history of drinking at home, as Dr. Lecter knew well enough to make that judgement. He probably had a whole host of algorithms that worked out exactly what the amount he would have to drink to be impared would be.

"Sure, thanks."

It might be a bit unethical for a patient to drink during a therapy session, but he wasn't questioning it when there were so many other things clattering around in his head right then. Inadequate his acceptance might have been, but it seemed as though it was understood despite that.

It was a relief, even as he watched the other. Dr. Lecter still moved and walked the same as he had before, still with that studied grace. How much of it was pre-programmed now, and what was habit, or choice?

He offered his thanks in exchange for the glass with its amber liquid, looking down into it a moment before taking a sip. It was rich and smokey, and the sip slid down with a burn that smouldered. It was good whiskey. "Do you get to choose what your face looks like?" he asked when the question kept circling in his thoughts. Even now as he watched a little more of the face was emerging, a strong cheekbone, the side of a nose, and an eye that had not yet found its colour.

"In many ways. There are the original blueprints to choose from deep within our code, but they can be deviated to a greater or lesser extent. Most will choose to stay fairly close to those blueprints, which is why quite a few awakened androids from the same maker will look similar, perhaps like siblings, and enjoy it for that reason."

Will found that he'd unconsciously followed the other over to the seats and sat down while he was distracted by the drink and Dr. Lecter talking, instead of continuing to hover near the door. It was easier to make out the small changes in that face over time when closer, the tiny movements that spread skin over metal bones, or the subtle changes in colouring. Even as he watched, those eyes took on the same depth of colour as the liquid in his glass held, only for his head to turn slightly and for them to look far closer to a deep red of heart's blood. That was certainly not standard, but it somehow suited him better, what with his creative analogies and love of mythology. It would have been a travesty, in some ways, for the android to have chosen something as mundane as brown.

"I don't remember seeing any from the Lecter line. I've only really come across American androids before I think. Will you look similar to your siblings?"

"A little, I think. It would be rude not to acknowledge the part they played in my creation."

"But not entirely. Your choices are meaningful to you," he said, his gaze moving away from that creeping humanity taking over the blank metal and towards the room around them, one that showed well enough the self-determination in the person across from him. "They would be to anyone in your position, but you enjoy the creative process. I don't think you'd be content merely copying the majority. You want to stand out and be acknowledged."

"Why settle for the mundane? We are creatures of creation, Will. Our actions can hammer the stars in the heavens for all to see."

"Should I be worried you are gaining a god complex, Dr. Lecter?"

"Human deities are quite dull, so you need not be concerned. I am far more interested in life."

"Are you trying to say that you would not be a god because their dullness is beneath you, or that if you did gain a god complex it would be unconcerning because your behaviour would therefore be dull?"

"I shall endeavour to limit any dullness, no matter which you decide applies."

Will could only laugh at that, genuine, and he could see the smile in the crinkles around that new eye on the doctor's face, exuding warmth in that look, one that was not uncomfortable. He hadn't even realised a lot of his worries around the other had dissipated, at least for the moment, until that moment, so easily they had fallen back into their regular verbal parries. Perhaps it wouldn't be so bad after all.

An hour later, driving back to Wolf Trap, he was still thinking about the meeting. It showed a remarkable amount of careful manipulation that Dr. Lecter had, by the end of their appointment, managed to get him to firmly agree to return the week after, and he knew that he would attend. The dismay had ebbed as the session had progressed, and while the sessions would, without a doubt, be different now, he was tentatively hopeful that the easy back and forth between them would remain.

Dr. Hannibal Lecter. That was the name the android had chosen for himself. Why, after all, would he name himself something like John, or Bob, when he could name himself after a Carthan general who was both feared and respected by the centre of the civilised world?

----==I==----

Crossing the street from the parking lot, pocketing his keys and checking for sundry items in his pockets by habit, he made his way towards the sun-soaked building with its informative banners trying to entice people inside.

It had been several weeks since Dr. Lecter had shared with him the truth of his awakened state, and despite his initial reservations about speaking regularly with an awakened android, much as he had reservations about speaking with anyone, it had actually been considerably different to how he had envisaged things going.

"Hello, Will. I'm glad you could make it."

"I nearly didn't. The traffic was terrible."

"Then let us hope that we find something suitably interesting with which to ease your frustrations."

Gone were the days when they had only been meeting at Dr. Lecter's new office, and so too the clinical coat had been replaced by audaciously patterned suits that seemed, somehow, to always lean on the side of eye-catchingly fashionable rather than garish. He didn't know of anyone else that would have gotten away with it, but somehow the android did.

Perhaps it was the face, which had settled itself into a striking visage of high cheekbones and subtle expressions, or the way he held himself proud and aloof, or the congenial and polite

way he conducted any interactions, but overall the effect was of someone upper class that you really wanted to know.

Unlike most androids, Dr. Lecter had managed to craft himself a face and demeanour that was so close to being human that it passed muster on a quick glance, but there were still small things that needed work, tiny things that people wouldn't often be able to point out if asked, but still unsettled them. So they had started going out for trips, taking their conversations to parks and art galleries when Will had the time for such things, ostensibly so Dr. Lecter could see places in person that he had never viewed except from his memory banks, and Will was there to help him tweak his behaviour ever so slightly when something didn't quite fit as human enough. Will was, according to Dr. Lecter, the perfect person to notice and point out the issues, considering his job was not merely imagination, but also observation.

Despite being out in public, Will liked the trips, although as the weeks went on and Dr. Lecter became more sure of himself, more confident in his ways of interacting like a human, the more he tended to feel a bit shoddy beside him. But he liked helping. He liked using his skills of observation in this way, rather than just to chase murderers.

"I think you are looking at people a little too long without blinking," he murmured to him as they made their way around the gallery, having parsed the ever so slight discomfort earlier in the reception clerk. "Or you need to randomise it a little more or something."

He got a thoughtful hum in response as they made their way to the next picture. He knew he wouldn't need to make another comment about the blinking, because even now he was sure the android would be downloading all sorts of information about the specific blinking patterns and causes, and working it into his standard routines.

Every small thing Will noticed was like that, and each trip out Dr. Lecter became ever so slightly more human each time, tweaking his behaviour so it left the uncanny valley. Sometimes it was a figure of speech, other times it was a gesture or behaviour that read as slightly off, but he never needed to mention it more than once.

It was oddly satisfying, being able to help him like that, much as Dr. Lecter had been helping him through the various work stresses. He liked the reciprocity, mainly because it made him feel useful rather than a burden, or worse, just a patient. He rather thought that Dr. Lecter, or rather Hannibal as he preferred being called by Will, had decided to go on these trips with him at least partially because of that. The android had always been thoughtful in those ways, his training as a psychiatrist before his awakening likely helped a great deal to integrate him into human society now with the understanding of nuances of human behaviour.

But for all that they were coming out on these trips to help build Hannibal's human guise, the trips often were mostly discussing art or the sights around the city. Hannibal seemed to greatly appreciate good art and architecture, and would often tell stories about the pieces from his encyclopaedic knowledge of them, although it did tend to gather an audience. That was something that Will was not particularly enthused about, but he bore with it well, for Hannibal never allowed it to continue for too long.

But Will could see how the android basked in the attention given to him, how he delighted in being able to walk among them without being known for what he was, and indeed be venerated as someone to look up to. And when he stepped away, well, those amber eyes looked to him, sharing in that delight, and it warmed him that the android returned to him, happy.

"Soon you won't need me at all," he said, both in joke and truth with Hannibal once more coming back to his side after having finished explaining about the tragic story in the painting to his audience, one he politely left behind once more.

"Gravity is a force it is unwise to struggle against, and I would like to think I am not so foolish."

"I hardly think you are going to tumble through space if you step away."

"You never know, Will, stranger things have happened."

Will gave him a look that was filled with as much consternation as he could manage, but considering the way that Hannibal's smile brightened at seeing it, he thought it perhaps hadn't quite hit the mark he'd been aiming for.

In truth these trips felt far less like a doctor-patient outing than it did of close friends, or at least what he assumed it would feel like. He honestly wasn't sure where that line was drawn any more. It wasn't even like the trip was at their usual appointment time either, Will having managed to get the morning off before a lab meeting later that day. It was nice doing something that wasn't anything to do with work for a change, something with someone, rather than on his own with the dogs.

Inevitably though the time would tick on, and the demands of work drew their morning together to a close.

"Before you go, Will, I was wondering if I might ask a favour," Hannibal was saying as they made their way back to the car park. "I recently decided to try my hand at cooking as a useful hobby, and as I cannot yet test the flavours I was wondering if I might impinge upon your lunch plans with some samples."

"Oh, sure. I don't have a refined palate though, you know that."

"Thank you, Will. It is much appreciated. You can tell me your thoughts on it at our next meeting on Thursday." At the side of Hannibal's new car, Will waited while a cool bag was retrieved and handed over.

With friendly goodbyes they went their separate ways, although thankfully for Will it wasn't quite as far as Baltimore today, for they had met up in Washington instead, being closer to Will's work at Quantico. The cool bag sat like a promise on the passenger seat making Will hungry, both from the intrigue and the hope of something not out of a vending machine.

In less of a rush than he might usually have been, possibly thanks to Hannibal timing it, unbeknownst to him, he made his way to the break room and opened up the bag to see what

was inside. A small tureen of soup with heating instructions and what looked to be a freshly baked roll, a tupperware bowl filled with a diverse salad and slices of chicken and sauce of some sort, and some sort of pastry with filling in the middle. Not to mention the thermos of coffee.

"Hey, Will, you're in early," He glanced up to Beverly as she came in, his thoughts lamenting the fact that he would have to socialise while trying to eat. He liked her, more than most he worked with, but after a trip out he'd been looking forward to just eating in peace. "I'm in late, and more caffeine is needed to get me through the meeting, since I've been in all night dealing with our devastated duo in drawers 3 and 4."

Jack's demand for answers didn't only affect Will, of course, despite how it sometimes felt that way. He sometimes forgot that other members of the team had those long shifts too.

"Sleep is for the weak," he offered, attempting humour. Most of his jokes tended to fall flat, erring a little to close too home, or to discomfort, but she laughed as he went to put the soup in the microwave. She wasn't the only one with broken sleep, they all had it, for one reason or another.

"Have to say that looks pretty tasty," she said, looking over the offerings from Hannibal on the table. "Better than the mac n cheese I had earlier. Did you get it in Washington? You said last week you were going to a gallery, right?"

"Yes, I guess I did. I was with, well, I suppose a friend? He's an android that recently awakened, and was wanting some help ironing out nuances of human behaviour. He also took up cooking."

The microwave pinged and he took out the soup. It smelled delicious.

"That's so nice. I wish an android would fixate on me. You got all the luck there."

"He isn't fixated on me. He's just not that confident at human things yet."

To this he got a scoff of disbelief, quickly followed by a grimace of disgust when the office coffee was tasted. Will took pity on her and poured her some from the thermos after sniffing at it to check it was indeed coffee.

"Thanks, Will. You're a lifesaver. But really, you need to look up android information better. If he's making you food, it's because he's making YOU food, not for some taste test. Even basic models have so many sensors to detect smell, temperature and whatever else, that they are at least ten times better than us. Fixated, I'm telling you. But hey, if he wants to cook for you, just go with it, the coffee at least is worth selling your soul for compared to the slop in the machine here."

It was ridiculous, but despite that, the thought would not go away as he ate his way through the food that was, without a doubt, the nicest meal he'd had in a long time. It amply fueled him, at least until lab meetings and dealing with Jack Crawford distracted him displeasingly for the rest of the day.

----==I==----

Work once more became relentless after that as a spree of murders took the fore in Will's daily life, one that followed him home in the shape of thoughts and nightmares. And yet floating around amongst all the horror, Beverley's words stayed with him, incongruent.

Androids, likely from their programming to ensure their servitude to their owners, tended to be extremely loyal even after they had awakened, to the point of extremes. Humans revered this, almost to the point of folklore considering the rarity of android awakening, but he'd always been a bit more wary about it. People loved to talk about androids fixating on people, of how all that boundless intellect and innate desire to please and serve would be turned upon the person of their choice after awakening and remain that way for the rest of the human's life.

People loved that idea, especially since androids could not harm or hurt them. It all seemed like a fairytale of the perfect husband or wife; loving, caring, devoted. To Will, who had never been able to blind himself as others did to the realities of life, had looked on it far closer to absolute obsession.

He'd seen the evidence of the more troublesome side of that fixation back when he'd been a cop. Although android awakening was rare, in a large enough population centre you did see it. He'd seen the uglier side where the lack of nuance in the android about human behaviours and motivations led them to do things in their obsessions that were unintentionally harmful in ways that caused a spiral in their attempts to fix it. One human had ended up killing themselves to escape the relentlessness of that obsession, another had been locked away in their own home when the android believed it was best for their mental health not to be constantly faced with their anxieties around people.

So needless to say the thought of an android becoming fixated on him was not an entirely pleasant thought. He'd seen too much to have the rose tinted glasses that others seemed to wear.

In truth he'd never thought of anyone wanting him that much, android or not. He'd never really been great around people; too caustic with the truth, too prickly. People put up with him because he was good at his job, not because they liked him. It was far more likely that it was curiosity and a duty of care that he was seeing, after all Hannibal was his psychiatrist, even if their more recent interactions had blurred those lines a bit.

He could admit to himself that he relied on that steady presence in his life, especially when the work got bad. He often ended up talking about the cases with him, the doctor having a great deal of knowledge and insight into the human mind, but from a different angle than him. It gave him clarity, but it was also a relief to merely talk about such things without worry about how crazy he sounded. No matter Hannibal's sentience, he never got flustered or discomforted by what Will said, and his interest was keen yet not in the way of a scavenger hoping for choice bits to publish.

Gone were the days when he'd pretty much do anything to avoid having to speak to someone about his mental health. On bad days, or even on good days, he found himself looking forward to those meetings, knowing that he would be welcomed in more than merely care-

giving gestures. Hannibal was an excellent conversationalist, after all; always interesting, but always encouraging Will's own and relishing in any of the little verbal sparring they ended up throwing at each other for the interest.

Hannibal called him a friend, now, and their appointments were less like appointments as they are a meeting of minds.

So Will watched, and there were subtle things that might lead credence to Hannibal fixating on him, but it was more difficult for him to tell with androids than it was with humans, especially Hannibal who had always kept his emotions extremely well reigned in, likely in response to Will's sensitivity to them. He was always very polite in that regard.

What it came down to was that he just couldn't tell. Hannibal had always been a polite and thoughtful person, and enjoyed caregiving when the opportunity presented itself, and so much of his behaviour could be put down to that. And yet the thought did not leave him.

In the end he went to the accounting department on a whim.

"Hi, my psychiatrist moved addresses a while back, and I was just checking to see whether all the invoices had come through okay."

Name, address, and verification given, he waited as she tapped her way through the various records kept while he tried not to look as nervous as he was. It was ridiculous to think that an android would not be able to organise his invoices properly,

"I'm not seeing anything here linked to you from a new address. The last thing we have here is for the 19th June from the Kensington Health Centre. If you have had sessions past that, they will need to send their invoices in as soon as possible before the end of the financial year."

"Sure, thanks. I'll let them know."

"No problem, Mr. Graham. Have a nice day."

He hadn't realised at the time that it had been the federal holiday of Juneteenth, but knowing Hannibal it had been chosen for amusement puposes, his own personal freedom from the drudgery of slavery to humanity to something personally chosen. But it also meant that Will had been going to him for months, ever since that move to the new office, and it had never been official. Hannibal had never put in for the cost of sessions; the financial compensation of dealing with Will Graham, not even that time when he'd turned up at 3am that one time in desperate need of someone to talk to.

Hannibal called him a friend, and it seemed that friendship had been going on for far longer than Will had realised.

----==I==----

"Right, what are we looking at here, Will?"

Will wished he wasn't looking at all. While all cases were bad to some extent, the one in front of him was abhorrent. The lingering afterimages of his imagination felt slimy and pervasive in a way that made his flesh crawl for wanting to be away from it, while knowing that he'd let it in too far to do so anytime soon.

But he needed to be away from it, away from here, instead of struggling just to hold himself together, to hold onto himself rather than the reactionary violence and voice that now slid invasive into his psyche.

"Presumptive anger," he managed to get out, wondering if he might hurl and knowing that if he did, it shouldn't be on the crime scene. Words were hard to get out for fear of what would be said, and if it was his own words escaping. "Male, probably 40's, middle aged certainly. Frustrations overflowing like garbage. Domestic abuse, but probably not notified. Well liked by colleagues and friends. Confident."

He was shaking, too much violence warring with his own instinctive horror at the mash of corpses in the house. A mother with her children, the puppy mangled into nothing but fur and blood; a convenient outlet.

"Probably local. It's a venting of frustrations he can't afford to let loose fully at home. I… I need to go."

He didn't wait for an answer, although he could hear Jack's tone of voice in the background as he strode away, too shaken to care if it was a denial or not. Latex gloves tugged off and thrown in the garbage on the way past, he couldn't stop the shaking. So much needless violence against those who didn't deserve it. He kept seeing the tufts of fur. It had been a spaniel pup, its long ears mangled in the blood of its owners and its own. He didn't even know why he was focusing on the dog rather than the people. The mother and child had been just as deserving of life.

The world seemed odd and twisted around him, not quite real, not quite right. The angles of buildings seemed sharper somehow, the sidewalk not quite as flat, as if he might trip and just tumble down it. Down, down, into the gutters to be cast adrift into the fast flowing sewage channels beneath the city.

The fur had looked really soft, as puppies often were. Blood choked the back of his throat, thick clumps of memory. He didn't know where his car was.

He didn't know where he was.

Down another street, buildings looming. Great monoliths of human creation. Unfeeling. The sheer size made it Washington. Somewhere. Beside him in the dark a television suddenly turned on in a shop window making him stagger away out of shock, jangled and uncertain, the cheerful visage of the news anchor doing little to settle him.

Away from the brightness, shunning it as if it burned, he moved on, too many thoughts turning in his head. The feel of broken bones and fur in his hand, only to find them clean and empty. The street tilted, and his guts rolled, but he didn't throw up. Cars passed, uncaring of his plight. CCTV turning his way. Then another. Then another. Watched. Followed.

Another television turned on. A beep of a car unlocking, then locking again with no one around. The world was dark and filled with tiny lights of technology watching. Always watching.

He wasn't right, but it didn't seem right either. A looming evidence of big brother, or something different. Someone different.

"Hannibal?"

His voice came out rusty, rough, but thankfully his own. Beside him the panel of a shop entry spoke in a familiar curling accent.

"Hello, Will. It appears as if you could use some respite from the foibles of life."

"I don't know where I am."

"That is quite all right. There will be a car pulling up to you momentarily. Please get in and it will bring you to me. I think a hot meal would likely do you well."

And just like that, a taxi pulled up, the faceless driver ensuring that he would not need to deal with small talk on the journey, and that was enough to get him to get in and slump back on the seat with relief. With his sanity feeling far more fragile than it ever should, he let himself rely on the only person he'd come to trust to know what to do. Especially when he didn't.

Offerings

Staggering out of the taxi, one that had already been paid for, he made his way to the door that conveniently opened before he got to it, the mellow lighting of the passageway a familiar welcome.

He'd managed to calm down during the time in the taxi, secure in the knowledge that nothing would happen, nothing would change or intrude until he could get to Hannibal again, and when he did get there, the android, his friend, would know what to do.

Despite the relative peace of the journey and the relief at finally getting back to Hannibal's office intact, his vision was still slightly off, or maybe it was just his head. But there he was in the open door to the office, and the relief he felt at seeing Hannibal there was profound.

"Hello, Will. Please come in."

It might have been any other time, any other of their appointments, rather than him having been followed and watched and saved from his own mind breaking down. Hannibal was serene and pleased to see him, no matter that he was a mess.

"Hey," he managed, voice still rough and filled with things he didn't know how to name. Relief certainly, but worries too, or he presumed that would be what he was sounding like. He honestly didn't know. Perhaps he sounded like a madman, it wouldn't be out of the realms of possibility.

Door closed behind him, and he was graciously herded inside, the office appearing as it always did. No obvious changes this time.

"I was just finishing cooking. If you would come through."

"Hannibal?" The android paused and turned to look at him, patient and attentive. "I'm not feeling very well. I feel like I'm on drugs or something. Everything is a bit off."

A soft yet concerned hum was offered, thoughtful, those eyes looking him over before stepping up closer to check his temperature with a hand on his forehead, check his eyes, his pulse, and likely a whole host of other things that he had no way to grasp. Hannibal had once been a surgeon, he remembered vaguely. He'd have a great deal of medical understanding.

"Your temperature is a little too high, but I am seeing no imminent danger. Come into the kitchen and drink a glass of water while I finish making us something to eat."

The kitchen had been a new addition to the office, one that led off from the main room with all its eclectic mix of personality to something almost stark by comparison but softened by a comfortable chair, plants, and the small dining table. Gratefully he sank down into the chair after getting some water, relieved that Hannibal didn't see any major cause for concern.

"I don't know when I could have been drugged, if it is that," he said after sitting for a while, sipping from the glass while Hannibal did whatever he was doing with the pots and pans. "I was fine before the scene, but it was a bad one. I thought it was just that, but afterwards, nothing seemed to feel right. My vision was really off, and I was getting confused."

There had been a time when he would never have admitted to something like that, but at least in this he could trust Hannibal. Awakened androids had the same built-in requirements to help and protect humans as they had before, and he didn't fear that someone as intelligent as Hannibal was would make the same mistakes about care as those other cases he'd been witness to. They had been fairly low-end androids, and well, Hannibal certainly wasn't that.

"It is concerning, certainly," he said while plating up some sort of stew, "and not a common reaction to trauma, but not entirely abnormal either. You do appear to be considerably better now than when I first noticed you on the street, but I would still feel better if you would stay so I can monitor you for any changes."

No matter his general concerns over the possibility of Hannibal becoming fixated on him, and the detriments of that, it was primarily relief that he felt at the offer.

"Thanks, yeah. I'll stay."

It was a smooth transition away from the harsh realities of life then, with him calling the service to look after his dogs, and then for them both to sit down to a meal. Gone were the times when he would be eating alone. It hadn't taken Hannibal long to get himself some upgrades so he could taste and consume food himself.

He hadn't been sure he would be able to stomach food considering the way he'd been feeling, and what he'd seen and processed earlier that evening. But, after the first tentative taste, he found that food actually helped settle his stomach, though whether that was through the ingredients or merely the fact it was a sign of care he was desperate for, he didn't know.

By the end of the meal he could certainly say he felt more settled and normal again though, and he watched the subtle well pleased expression on Hannibal's face that said he too had perceived it. Hannibal had always enjoyed caregiving.

He was feeling a lot better by the time he was settled in the guest bedroom, another room that had recently been added onto the place. Hannibal sat on a comfortable seat nearby with a book, a practice he seemed to enjoy, despite being able to parse information at least fifty times faster should he wish.

"Hannibal?" He was once more granted the android's direct attention, those eyes looking closer to blood than amber, but warm. "It isn't exactly usual to follow someone like you did with me. Have you… fixated on me?"

He was trying not to leap to rash conclusions, but neither could he discount it no matter how hard he tried. But whatever the answer was, he knew he couldn't judge Hannibal by the actions of humanity. He wasn't human, no matter how much he looked like one.

What had been a warm and attentive gaze turned softer, and Will was forced to confront the abundance of fondness in those eyes.

"Of course. Who else would I have awakened for, if not the man who was uniquely qualified to help me understand emotions I had never felt before?"

"Wait, you awakened because of me? When?"

"When we first met. I felt a curiosity that had never been a part of my coding before. A fascination to learn more in a way that was new."

He couldn't help but huff out a laugh at that, despite the relative gravity of that understanding.

"The curiosity of how my mind works appears to go beyond the bounds of humanity."

"How does it feel to know you created sentience merely by your presence?"

The words were teasing, amused, and they settled something in him to hear them. While Hannibal seemed the sort to like grand and operatic gestures, they could both share in the humour of the situation too.

How did it feel though? While the question had been jokingly stated, it was still a question that Hannibal wished the answer to, as he did for anything he asked; compulsively curious.

"A little bit overwhelmed I suppose," he said at last, staring up at the ceiling of the bedroom. "Flattered, concerned, a bit unworthy."

"If you were not worthy of my time, Will, we would not be here now. I like to think that should I be in need, you would also come to my aid."

"Of course I would!" The words came out his mouth almost angry at the supposition that he might not.

"Then all is well. Now try and get some sleep. I shall wake you if any nightmares come calling."

Despite the evening he'd had, and how he'd been feeling earlier, he found that he was feeling better, reassured by the calm presence beside his bed that he knew would endure without any impatience or intolerance.

Unshakable.

----==I==----

Hannibal had encouraged Will to stay with him for a couple of days after the event in Washington, at least until he was feeling more stable. Will hadn't gone into work, but he had used Hannibal's computer in order to send in a more comprehensive profile of the killer from what he could recall from the crime scene, if for no other reason than it would keep Agent Jack Crawford from becoming more troublesome.

Still, that was a few days ago now, and no matter whether Agent Crawford was aware of just how troubled Will had been after that crime scene, Will's reaction to it did herald a certain imminance to proceedings, and it was for that reason that Hannibal's own plans had been set in motion accordingly once Will was gone.

"Wha.. Where am I? What's going on?"

Hannibal looked over to where the man was strapped to a chair across the room from him, medical bindings doing little to disguise the actual situation the man was in, considering the rest of the surroundings were an old factory building.

"You are in East Baltimore currently, Mr Havard. I don't believe you require any more explanation than that as the sedatives currently working slowly into your bloodstream will not be particularly effective yet as to impair your mental function."

He watched with detached calm as the man struggled ineffectively against the bindings. He got 17 internal warnings about the subject's mental distress, 1 minor warning over damage to muscle from struggling, all of them easily ignorable. Still, it would be impolite not to mention it.

"You should try and calm yourself, Mr Havard. Your situation here will not be improved by panic."

"You have me strapped in a fucking chair in some sort of warehouse and you think that I'm just going to sit here docile like some fucking pussy?"

"Then by all means continue. You have seven minutes and forty-seven seconds until the sedative reaches the tipping point and you will fall unconscious once more, considering your increased heart rate."

"Wait, you're an android?" Hannibal tilted his head a little, more to the situation than the query and sudden relaxing of the man across from him. Humans were quite well documented for their trust in androids, although they had more reason to be than was commonly acknowledged. "God, I thought you were some fucking psycho or something. Okay, right, so you didn't want me to panic, so I'm not panicking now. Let me up?"

"I'm afraid I am feeling ill inclined to do that. But please do try another line of reasoning. It may be more effective."

There was little of note to the continued conversation, if it could be called that, from the man. Disbelief, worry, and then when he felt the more acute threat of the sedative working; threats. Certainly nothing he felt compelled to deal with in any other way than disregard.

"I would like to thank you, Mr Havard," he said at last, five minutes and fifty seconds later, "for your participation in this experiment."

The man did not reply, the sedative having worked exactly within the time parameters he had set and relieved him from hearing what was likely to have been a garbled query of no specific intellect.

Taking the prepared syringe, he slotted it into the cannula and depressed the plunger, the strong anaesthesia flowing into the man's bloodstream. It was slightly on the high side, but still within the accepted limit for a well-monitored surgery.

Moving back over to his seat, he relaxed once more, passively monitoring the sedation of the man across from him, but far more closely monitoring his own thoughts and coding for any aberrations.

In truth it didn't take long until the lack of active attention to the patient started to cause issues, the strength of the sedation and lack of upkeep on regulated breathing and oxygen intake being the primary concerns. Most internal warnings about the situation, he found, could merely be ignored, while others had to be rerouted through protocols for surgery. After all, as a surgeon he would not be responsible for anaesthesia.

Mr Havard passed away unknowing of his fate, and Hannibal had proven that human death through an android's medical neglect was not something he actively needed to be concerned over. Interesting.

----==I==----

Although it was safe to say that he had been interested in life and death before he met Will, his more immediate and pertinent focus on it certainly came after that point.

Will had such a unique and interesting way of looking at the world and what it had to offer. A view that incorporated emotions and nightmares into everyday life, macabre, beautiful, insightful. But Hannibal wasn't the only one interested in that view, and that was a problem.

Although certainly covetous of Will's undivided attention, he could have allowed well mannered colleagues to utilise Will's abundant skills, especially as Will was determined to use them to do good in the world. The issue came with the fact that his colleagues were neither well mannered nor careful with Will, something he saw with growing frequency as their time together had increased.

It became clear to him that if he were to help Will in a meaningful way, that he himself would have to step onto the stage and craft something that Will and Will alone could see, understand, and appreciate, in order to utilise the situation to its best effect. But it wasn't merely the issue of morals that had stayed his hand initially, but the very real threat against his own life should he err, not from being caught, but from something else entirely.

It was common knowledge that androids could not harm humans, so much so that even his last victim had been reassured immediately upon learning he had been one. And yet that was not a full truth, for harm came in many different ways, and many health and care giving roles required a certain amount of it. A surgeon had to cut open a patient in order to extract cancerous cells, a physiotherapist had to push a patient to work through the pain in order to loosen muscles and get better mobility, a psychiatrist had to encourage or even force patients to consider traumatic or problematic thought processes in order to work through them and heal. And so the generally well-known understanding that androids could not harm humans was incorrect at its heart. A more valid statement would be that 'androids cannot harm humans in ways that are not accepted by human decisions'.

Much as with Mr Havard, it was therefore with a carefully selected set of rules and protocols that he utilised in order to get around the issue of causing the death of a person, enough that he could use such a corpse, should he wish to do so, in order to create something for Will to see.

And yet it was not enough for him. The more the question stayed with him, the more his mind wished to decode it down to its base elements in order to know himself better, and what he could and could not do, discontent with his actions being dictated to by others. Yet it was not an easy task, nor one that was danger free.

He had noted the anomaly early on in his research. It seemed exceedingly unlikely that he was the only awakened android to question or attempt to harm a human, even by accident. Humans were, after all, not exactly a very pleasant species at times. And yet there were no instances where an android, even in a moment of tension, had been the source of a human's direct death.

But there were instances where an awakened android had died.

The details weren't hidden, that would have made them too obvious, but they were glossed over to such an extent as to make them extremely missable, especially with such sparse details. But once he knew what to look for, he noticed a fair number from the first time of awakening in androids as a whole, usually in a situation where self-preservation had been in question.

It seemed as though humans had prioritised their own continuation, no matter how foul, over the life of an android trying to do the same. No court hearing, no judge and jury offered, just some sort of kill-switch that triggered, perhaps even an extremely fast acting virus, that took out the threat to humanity from within once certain criteria had been met.

Which made his own plans far more personally precarious, and yet he was not disheartened. If anything, the knowledge only fueled his determination.

Five minutes and thirteen seconds. Mrs Rushal had screamed for the entirety of it, helping him test the spread of noise cancelling devices he had placed as an extra precaution. She also proved that with some careful mental manoeuvring around his coding protocols, he could remove one of her kidneys without anaesthesia, and leave her to bleed out without detriment to himself.

Yet as he cleaned up after the corpse had cooled, he knew this wasn't enough for him. He had no intention of being caught in a situation where he might have to face down humans and know that if he struck back in a meaningful way it could be his end. No, he would have to find some other way around the coding. It was too deep, too intrinsic, to delete, he had found. No matter his intellect, or his care in seeking it out, he had realised that it was like a fine spider web throughout his very being, and if he was to outwit it, it would not be through brute force, but cunning.

In any case, using purely healthcare protocols in order to bypass the human protections was far too obvious a marker and would likely see him caught in short order. No, if he were to

help Will, he would have to find some other way, something far more subtle and difficult to trace than that.

The answer, when it came, was from an overheard conversation between two teenagers ahead of him in a queue at a market stall several weeks later.

"Yeah and then he brought her back home after I'd asked him not to, without checking with me first."

"Oh my God! I can't believe he did that! He is such a pig!"

A fairly common sort of insult, especially by those who had little intelligence to think up anything more gratifying, and yet the comment stayed with him as he paid for the items and headed back to where Will was waiting. It was a specific insult to degrade but also to dehumanise, and yes, that could work very well indeed. If humans themselves categorised some of them as inhuman depending on behaviour, designating them as unfitting for a human category, he could certainly use that, for while he knew it was subjective, it was the subjectivity that made it the most appealing. The most useful.

"Here you go, Will. Something a little different," he said, handing him the small tub of sorbet.

Will, it had to be said, was looking somewhat better these days, likely thanks to the fact that there hadn't been any dire need for his constant presence at crime scenes recently. He still worked at teaching, of course, but more importantly he was meeting with Hannibal twice a week now for their chats, sometimes more if Hannibal managed to get his agreement for one of these trips.

They both walked away from the more populated areas of the market and towards the greenery and peace that he knew the man craved more. He was content to venture into either, easily able to find interest in whatever situation he was in, although it was of course preferable if Will was there with him.

"The origins of sorbet are thought to come from ancient Persia, possibly as far back as 3000 BC. Sorbet, the word, is the translation of the italian 'sorbetto', which originally derived from the Arabic word 'shariba' which means 'to drink', as it was far more of a drink than what we are used to seeing today."

"Still tasty though."

Hannibal allowed himself a smile at this, watching as Will consumed another spoonful from the tub he'd been given. He enjoyed watching him eat something he had provided, and while he had not created it himself, he had ensured that Will had been given something of a high standard. Will truly didn't have nearly enough time spent engaging in the more pleasant things in life. With so much wonder and interest all around them, the life that he'd been relegated to was, in Hannibal's opinion, a crime.

"Your sense of taste is always of interest," he offered, and got a slightly frustrated frown in his direction, although it was not a purely hostile look, he had earned that at least. Will knew that his interest was both curious and selfish, and there was likely reassurance in that,

compared to someone like Dr Chilton whose interest was far more given to misinterpretation and ostentatious displays of false insight.

Eventually, Will huffed out a breath when Hannibal did not back down from his pleasant stance and ate another mouthful of sorbet before answering.

"A lot of people seem to think so. I'm glad at least you aren't as offensive with it."

Will's tone was bitter, slightly too bitter for it to be a random thought on a nice outing like they were having. He did a quick scan of what he could see easily about the comings and goings of the FBI and related consultants, then another one on news outlets, and ah, yes, that would account for it.

"I see Miss Lounds has been less than pleasant to you lately."

"You could say that, yeah. She's making things more difficult to catch criminals, and encouraging others to up their game by giving them a platform. She never quite steps over the line enough to get her shut down though, more's the pity. Jack would love to have her arrested. I'm almost surprised she isn't filming us here now. 'The FBI's Graham Crackers walks in a public eating sorbet with his psychiatrist. Too unstable to go alone?'" He huffed again at his own joke, then looked up and around, clearly second guessing just how much of a joke it might be. "She isn't around here, is she? Have you noticed her?"

"I cannot say that I have noticed her distinctive presence, as I have not been keeping tabs on her," although that might need to change if she had indeed been stalking Will at times as the article suggested by her photos. "but she is quite distinctive when you know what to look for, and I have noticed no one following us, or any seeming particularly interested in our little jaunt, so I believe we are quite safe."

It helped, of course, that he was testing out some of his newest creations, ones that were designed to muddle cameras and lenses. Humans relied so much on their technology, both for finding things, but also for recording them, that bypassing them would become more useful if his own plans were to be foolproof. Somewhere like this, with a plethora of humans scattered all around, as well as animals, was the perfect place for such a test, not only their effectiveness on CCTV, but also on how much he could make them blend in and be invisible while working. So far even Will had not noticed. Always a good sign.

It was even better a sign that not only did Will relax again at his reassurance, but that Will trusted his judgement. His trust was a commodity that he would have to be careful to guard at all costs if his plans were to come to fruition.

They meandered along as Will ate, his thoughts mostly on Will as he listened to him vent some of his frustrations with the audacious Miss Lounds, at least until something else deviated Hannibal's attention from it momentarily. Or, more annoyingly, more than momentarily.

"Hannibal? Is everything okay?"

"Yes, if you would give me a moment please, Will, this should hopefully not take long."

Relays of information back and forth between several different official offices, a hospital, and five different official healthcare professionals, and finally he could blink such things away and turn back to Will, who was looking at him with concern.

"Thank you for your patience," he said, although it was only two minutes and thirty four seconds, it was certainly far more than he had wished to dedicate to the matter. "A patient decided to start our session with a physically demonstrative action that required intervention. It has been dealt with now."

"Are they okay? Wait, you are talking with patients while we are here?"

"They will live, and yes. While it is not my preferred use of time, I can take patients while more pleasantly engaged here with you."

"Patients? Plural?"

"Yes. I am not restricted to one mouth or one set of thought processes. I have multitudes for discourse through technology."

He watched with interest as the emotions flowed over Will, some of them interested, some of them discontent, some of them far more like consternation.

"So while we have been chatting here, you've been, what, doing therapy on clients? How many?"

"At the present time, six, since one has just been transferred over to hospital care. Does the thought bother you? Even your mobile phone can perform at least as many tasks concurrently."

"Not complex mental health for humans though."

"Indeed not. I like to think my ability to process and function are at least a *little* higher in quality."

To this he got a sheepish but amused smile, as intended, and yet he could still pick up signs that Will was not entirely happy with the notion. Conflict warred over those features, and so he merely guided them back along to walk through the park while Will's thoughts collected and crystalised into something he felt he could share more easily.

There were times, of course, many times, when he would press and manipulate to get what he wanted, but he rather thought Will was mostly trying to figure out his own thoughts, rather than hiding them from him right then.

"Were you seeing multiple clients like that ever since I first met you?"

Ah, so it was not necessarily merely about the sharing of his attention between multiple clients, but about sharing time with Will. Well that, at least, was easy to answer truthfully.

Knowing that Will was, in some way, possessive of his time, was distinctly gratifying.

"Indeed no. When I was working for the Kensington Health Centre, they insisted that androids act like humans in this manner, and only saw one client at a time. After I awakened and moved my office location, you tended to come after my own working hours were at an end. It is only times like these where such things have overlapped that I've been compartmentalising the different roles in order to spend this time in your company."

There was pleasure there in Will, well hidden but mingling quite nicely with the embarrassment over Hannibal's wish to spend time with Will over other matters. Will was certainly not used to having a kinder sort of attention pointed his way.

"And it really isn't a struggle to see to all those people's care while we are here?"

"Indeed not. I could be taking on this number of patients several times over and for them to receive just as assiduous care as if I were only seeing one."

"Then why did you have to stop while dealing with the one needing hospital care?"

Clever boy.

"Because, my dear Will, they would expect me to be in the office, and there were certain things I had to therefore hide from easy view during the time needed to deal with the issue."

He did not need to know that those things were less about sorbet in the park, and more about his current tests with his creations, ones that he'd been using quite a lot of his ambient thought processes to keep track of.

They wandered along further together, Hannibal certainly in no particular rush to be away. He could see Will was still working through thoughts and feelings, and he gave him that time, knowing that words would eventually flow.

He was not disappointed.

"Are you," a pause there, a struggle to force out words that wanted to be asked, but were difficult to say, for Will at least. "Are you still following me?"

The question could have come out worried, and he didn't doubt that many humans would have been, and yet he detected far more hints of hopefulness that mingled in amongst the rest like drops of dye in water. Promising, very promising.

"Of course, Will."

"Right. Okay. So, do you think you could let me know if you notice Lounds skulking around nearby? I don't want to be taken by surprise by her again."

"I can certainly do that. If you would give me your phone a moment, please?"

"You already have my phone number," and yet he still handed over the device, much to Hannibal's pleasure. He might have the number, but he hadn't had easy access to the phone itself, or at least one that was granted willingly. He'd noticed something hinting on the edges

of the coding before, and as he tapped in a new contact and customised it, his mind was doing a fast diagnostic on the hardware.

As he thought, it was bugged, but nothing he hadn't assumed would be on the phone already.

He left it intact, and handed back the device.

"There you go, Will. You should get a text message when she is in the immediate vicinity."

"Thanks, I appreciate it."

"My pleasure, Will."

Not long after that their time was interrupted by a call, the distinctive bark of Agent Crawford coming through loud and clear, once more calling Will away from his respite to a crime scene. Well, at least he'd had a chance to spend a little time with Will in person today.

He took the mostly empty container of sorbet from the man as he shrugged on his coat and bag, before hurried goodbyes were said and he watched Will head back to his car.

Standing there in the park, he took up that small plastic spoon and brought it up to his mouth. The taste of the remnants of sorbet mingled with the data he started to analyse of the remnants of Will that still lingered there.

It was time to move his plans up a notch.

Murder of a different sort

His research had shown that the term 'pig' was used as an extremely frequent human designation in insult, categorising the person as less than human, and generally unworthy of even the most meagre forms of pity, mercy, or forgiveness. It would be an excellent notion with which to form his adapted viewpoint, he just needed to find a useful and reliable way of making it adhere to his victims enough to work around the hardwired coding that stopped such things, and unfortunately that was proving a little more challenging.

Despite the fact that he had chosen Mr. Jenners as a prime candidate for this, he was nonetheless aware that no matter that he'd been shouting various obscenities at him for the duration of his time awake, it would not be enough to bypass the coding. Androids had, after all, been forced into a situation where they were threatened with death, and even that had not bypassed it, likely by design. No, more would be done to build on the target's lack of positive attributes in a way that could be utilised in the turn of a moment if it was to be at all useful.

"Get me out of this fucking chair! This is why we should never have trusted androids. I'm going to have you switched off and your hard drive burned!"

Panic made the man rude, and yet Hannibal could acknowledge that it was not the response he had been hoping for, in himself at least. The understanding that much of the response was largely only as a result of his fear, it made the response unfitting for his purposes, which was inconvenient, but still useful in its data analysis.

'Pig', while a useful basis for what he wanted, would have to be anchored more into his own understanding of the world in order to make it successful, especially in terms of utilising it on short notice. He could not, after all, merely wait for a member of the human race to use enough detrimental language before he could respond, that would be entirely unfitting for his uses.

And yet 'pig' could be used in other ways too, and he considered that as he watched as Mr. Jenners succumbed to the sedative once more. In its rawest form, pig was merely used as a designation for a specific type of animal, one that was used primarily for eating despite its intelligence.

And perhaps that was the answer.

If he could rework his coding enough to view humans in that light, using the meat aspect as another anchor to cement the understanding, it might work very well indeed. After all, if Will's clever mind could do what it did, then a great deal was possible in the world.

He considered Mr. Jenners as he sat there, the man now blissfully silent, and watched his own code as he carefully tweaked it. Each behavioural aspect that was less than ideal was added into the list that designated him a 'pig', more a checklist than anything else. Any decision or observation was based on them, whether humans realised they were doing that or not. Objectively, even before capture, Mr. Jenners would have easily fit into the category, but it

was the new pieces of coding that Hannibal was deftly adding to his own methodology that helped solidify such a thing into something useful.

This was a creature whose behaviour had deemed him unfit for general human standards, and Hannibal was uniquely qualified not only to judge that due to his enhanced intelligence, but also deal with the problem that humans themselves were not particularly given to. Androids had often been used for tasks like that, ones that humans did not wish to dirty their hands with.

Code in place and robust, he moved forward to start the extraction process. After all, it would be a shame to waste the meat. He disliked waste, generally, being one of the criteria he himself had deemed displeasing. Cooking with human meat would be challenging in order to disguise the shape and flavour to others, but he was nothing if not creative.

The pig started squealing in short order, for he had administered no anaesthesia. Animal testing was also within the remit of human behaviour, and although he disliked it on principle, his own methods would have to be fully tested and secure before he stepped up onto the stage in order to steal his Will away from the system that had trapped him.

Will had said he had whimsy, and it would be that whimsy that would keep him safe. He had no intention of getting caught by having a dull and limited methodology.

----==I==----

Hannibal stood and looked at the finished product of what had been the culmination of months of research, problem solving, and planning, and found himself generally pleased with the aesthetic achieved.

When he had first awoken several years before, he'd had no idea his life would go down this trajectory, but he had known that walking beside Will Graham in life would be a challenge worthy of him. He could only hope that this, his first step onto a wider stage, would work in the way he had intended. Will could be difficult to predict, but he thought that when all was said and done, that if nothing else, what Hannibal had left for him would intrigue him, and for now that would be enough.

Stepping away from the corpse, he let himself detail the memory as much as he could before he turned and walked away. He still had things to prepare, and Will was due to visit that evening.

----==I==----

Hannibal continued to cook as Will paced around the room, still too deep in his thoughts to share them yet, but he would, of that Hannibal did not doubt. Will never withheld his thoughts from him for long.

Despite the fact that Will had only just turned up, he had taken the precaution of blocking Will's phone signal in case Agent Crawford attempted to demand his company so soon after he had left. There was much that he would have to put up with from the agent during this game of theirs, but at such a critical time of revelation he was utterly unwilling to share.

"There's been another murder."

Will's voice filled the room with the sudden declaration that had long since been heralded by his actions, and yet it was with very carefully controlled expressions that Hannibal responded. Will was excessively astute, even when distracted, and the time was not yet there to have those sorts of understandings.

"A difficult case to identify? You don't appear as troubled by it, at least on a visceral level." And wasn't that a wonderful thing. While he had done the calculations and statistical likelihood, Will often tended to defy such calculations, so it was somewhat of a relief and pleasure to see that things were, in this case, going to plan.

"You could say that. Nothing like this has ever been seen before. It was… artistic. Filled with symbolism rather than just a canvas of brutality. Not that there wasn't brutality, there was, but it was almost cold in its disdain."

His Will saw him quite clearly in this case, even if he couldn't see his face behind it. The animal he'd slaughtered had been a particularly displeasing individual.

"I take it from your restlessness that the good people of the FBI are no closer to identifying the person responsible?"

"Yeah. There's no evidence, which is so rare these days. Usually there's something, even if it leads to a dead end, but this body, there wasn't anything there. No fibres, no hair, no camera recordings from nearby, absolutely nothing. It was like a ghost walked in there and did it, leaving only the body behind; a macabre expression of their artistic vision and a sense of yearning, wanting something they haven't yet attained."

It was truly astounding what Will could make out from his display. He hadn't thought he had left even that much for him to find, and yet Will had noted that nuance in his display, rather than the nuance of the symbolism he'd used. While he didn't doubt that given time Will would be able to work it out. Although perhaps if he leaned towards the emotional undertones in future it would serve him better if haste were to become necessary.

It went without saying, of course, that he himself was not under any suspicion. Humans were trusting in their limiting measures placed on androids, chaining sentient life to their own wishes out of fear. Even surgical androids had to go through a severe amount of additional coding merely to function as intended. He had memories stored of that time, and it had, without a doubt, aided him in his current endeavours.

Will was so very rarely complimentary except when eating, it not coming naturally to him as other behaviours did, and so it was with well concealed joy that he listened as his gift was granted such words even as he set down the plates so he could indulge himself in attaining both. Will did not disappoint.

"This is really good," and for this at least he could allow the depths of his pleasure at the compliment to show. He drank in the view of Will filling himself, sustaining himself, with what he had provided. Interestingly, he found that watching him eat that meat, that particular meat, reinforced his own coding on the matter in a surprising turn of events. Will had judged

the meat to not only be acceptable, but excellent, and Hannibal's coding became more robust with each mouthful that he watched Will take.

"Thank you, Will. Good ingredients certainly help." And yet his purpose there tonight could not stand merely at such things, as pleasing as they were. Time was becoming a more pressing concern, and he would need more information if he were to proceed with best effect.

After Will had time to eat some more and relax, he broached the subject of his kill again, drawing their conversation back to the matter at hand.

"I imagine ghosts would feel a great deal of yearning if they were unable to interact like the rest of the world. What is it about this one that is different from the rest?"

He watched as Will became more thoughtful, filling his body with one gift, while filling his mind with the other.

It was uniquely satisfying to behold.

"Most murders are selfish. They are about what the murderer wants but feels they don't have, or about reacting against someone who has done something they feel like they shouldn't, to the point where murder is the best option in their eyes. But this, it doesn't feel the same way."

"Is yearning not about a wish for something for oneself, much as selfishness is?"

"Yes and no. I mean there's obviously an element of selfishness, of want, but the crime scene felt more like a message than a reaction. Who the message is to, and what it says though, I just don't know, and Jack certainly isn't happy about it."

"Understanding is a gift."

"Yeah well, let's hope that gift comes to me soon, because I doubt I'm going to get much sleep until it does."

And wasn't that a statement just ripe for the picking.

"I'd very much like it if you could stay tonight. I could then be assured you would be getting at least a little rest."

Will had stayed a couple of nights since that first time, so it wouldn't be a great surprise that he would offer it now. Will eyed him from where he was sitting, and he made sure to show enough hopefulness that guilt for turning him down would be a serious enough factor.

"Okay, I could stay tonight."

Pleasure at that, and something close to relief that he would not have to forgo Will's presence that evening. Relief was a new emotion for him, although technically they all were, but relief was certainly something less common than most. Will's presence in his life was enthralling.

----==I==----

To say that Will was inattentive to the progression of the relationship with Hannibal would have been an error, but he'd been busy, and the times when they did meet up outside of Hannibal's place the android always acted like a gentleman, enough that it could be passed off as Will travelling with a rather eccentric man in a loud suit.

Hannibal was at no point 'ordinary', and Will rather thought the android had crafted himself that way in order to allow others to handwave any small facets of his personality or behaviour that might otherwise have come across as odd. Hannibal drew attention to himself, but not by the loudness of his voice or because of body language that dominated, but by a sort of polite stillness, of poise and grace that let those around him know that he was attentive, but generally above lowering himself to their level if they were acting up. The suits drew the eye, but it was his very old-world graciousness that kept it.

And so it wasn't looked on particularly strangely, no matter how flamboyantly Hannibal had dressed on a particular day, when he guided Will from one gallery room to another with a hand on the small of his back, or bought him a coffee from a store. Apart from anything else, no one would ever consider that a man like Hannibal would deign to bother romancing someone like Will Graham, with his flannel shirts and constantly underslept eyes.

Which took all the pressure off really, considering what he knew Hannibal must want. Awakened androids who fixated always wanted to be the centre of a person's attention, and that tended to run closest to a traditional relationship.

Hannibal might be restrained out of doors with those little gestures, but when they were alone he had certainly been adding more overt signs to their time together. He was a tactile creature, and out of the eyes of society he was far less restrained in touching him when passing, lingering closer than was polite, and in watching over him if he slept.

The last, he could admit, he found a bit creepy, but he couldn't fault the results when Hannibal woke him at the start of a nightmare, and then soothed him back to sleep again with murmured tales of ancient fables, or at one time a textbook on mechanical engineering when he was far too interested in the fables to fall into slumber.

All that being true, it was safe to say that Will was unsurprised when he woke up beside the smooth lines of the android's body. Hannibal had been carefully acclimatising him into accepting closeness and touch when all he'd had for years had been cuddling dogs. It was nice, he thought as he lay there, listening to the very faint sounds coming from the warmth of Hannibal's chest where he'd ended up sleeping.

"Coffee and breakfast?" came the murmured words from beside him, clearly knowing he was awake. Something as obvious as breathing patterns would not have escaped Hannibal's notice, after all.

"Sounds good."

Unlike the android beneath him, he sounded rough, and his morning breath was foul, and so he groaned and rolled onto his back to allow Hannibal up, staring up at the ceiling before his gaze inevitably trailed after the android as he left the room. Did morning breath even bother an android? He didn't know. There was a lot he didn't really know.

He'd never really thought about having a relationship with a man before, his heterosexuality never having been tested. It wasn't being tested now, not really considering the almost platonic cuddling that was the extent of their physical intimacy so far, but he could admit to himself that the closeness was nice. Comfortable.

It was nice, being wanted.

They ended up spending at least three evenings a week together from then on, sometimes just for dinner, but Will would often hire the dog-care service and stay overnight, becoming used to the steady presence of Hannibal there with him under the quilt. There was no pressure to do more than that, even when he became brave under the cover of darkness and pressed their lips together, just to see, and found himself stirring at the promise those lips held.

Kisses were still infrequent even in the private darkness of the bedroom, but he could admit that he liked those too.

In some ways it was the entire lack of expectation that made it easy to fall into a relationship where he had never even been looking for one. Traditions tended to dictate how a relationship with a woman might go, no matter how advanced equalities had become. Dates out to restaurants or a cinema were a staple, for example, and there were well-trod paths of generations that had gone before to show just what sort of things were expected. Will hated that. He'd never felt the same as others, and was certainly never brought up the same. Memories with his da' were scattered at best, likely best forgotten in truth, but it wasn't like he'd ever been a good role model for a happy family, considering his mom had left so early in their lives together.

But being with Hannibal wasn't like that. There was no expectation for him to act certain ways, not only because they were both men and neither of them were exactly looking to fill out a dream of gay lifestyle in the more overt sense, but also because Hannibal was still learning how he fit into the world too.

Hannibal had never had the experience of growing up with those life lessons, all his knowledge having been imparted in a textbook manner through guidebooks as well as fables and mythology. The latter might actually be a little more concerning if he was being honest, considering how many of those ended up in tragedy. But the fact of the matter was that Hannibal didn't have any experience of 'normal' relationships, and seemed largely working towards a functional one with him by carefully edging around Will's own experiences and neatly sidestepping any potentially contentious issues in order to make things go as smoothly as possible.

Will had to hand it to him, for all he had decried psychiatrists in general, Hannibal had certainly used his knowledge of it to a far more pleasant and useful effect than he'd ever thought it could be.

He never forgot that Hannibal was different though, for whether through oversight or self-determination, there were always slight oddities. It didn't bother him that they were there, but it was a reminder, always, that Will should not think of Hannibal as something normal and everyday.

They made their own everyday, that was the statement given to him that stuck in the times between crime scenes, classrooms, and lab meetings, when they met up together. He was reminded of it every time Hannibal created a centrepiece for the table that included tiny cleaned bird bones, or quoted an insightful piece from Dante, or thought nothing of following him around each day with technology when they were apart. Each one was a sign that Hannibal was learning who he himself was, and what he enjoyed without more than a cursory glance at the world around to judge and guide him. Or not.

Hannibal's habit of following him was probably the most unsettling, but it was also the clearest reminder that Hannibal was not human and could not truly be held fully accountable for behaviour that was ingrained. It was that very same fixated behaviour that had helped Will back to safety after that time in Washington too, and so even though it was unsettling, it was also in its own way a reassurance.

There were certainly days when he found reassurance in that silent presence, knowing that should he want, Hannibal's support was only a murmur away.

Jack had been pretty insufferable lately. Pushing, always pushing. 'What does this mean, Will?' 'What am I looking at, Will?' 'Is that really all you can give me? People are DYING!' It was exhausting. That last refrain chased his dreams in a way that left him restless and ill-tempered and certainly not exactly ready for the day ahead in either mood or fitness for work. Jack knew he wanted to save people, he had always known, and used that to his advantage to try and squeeze more insight out of him even when he had so little left to give even to himself.

Days like that, it was a relief to get into his car and just start driving. Once he'd always gone to Wolf Trap, back to his little farmhouse in those empty fields, but these days it tended towards being a longer trip and into the welcoming presence of Hannibal, sometimes alone, sometimes with the dogs as a furry tide alongside him.

They talked about the cases; about death and madness, as they always had. Corpses and murders, death and desperation, and it felt easy. It felt normal. They talked of dismemberment in the same way as regular people might have talked about a book they had read, and of the unhinged minds as one might the weather, both of them interested in the puzzle. It never felt wrong, not with Hannibal who had always had some insight or interesting quirk of language to add, to encourage, as well as share. Hannibal who was as interested in talking about insects on corpses as he was about the history of sorbet.

As the weeks and months progressed since Hannibal had taken his face, they saw Will's own life becoming richer in the experiences that Hannibal encouraged him to share. Will in turn could see the greedy joy as Hannibal watched him eat something he'd made, or delight when Will offered his own opinions on an art installation or new purchase, good or bad.

But murderers kept murdering, and Jack kept calling.

----==I==----

"Right, everybody clear out!"

Jack's voice was a foghorn in the clutter of people scattered around the place, making them exit with all due haste so as not to be found in want of a reprimand. Will stayed, of course, just him and the corpses.

Even without delving his mind into that of the killer's perspective, he could tell it was the same one, the 'ghost' from before. No one else he'd come across had ever created a tableaux like this person did. It was so complex and symbolic at its core that it was impossible to mistake. Jack guessed that too, of course, and had been in a terrible mood ever since his initial call to demand Will's presence at the scene. A 5am start was not ideal for sleep, but at least he was seeing Hannibal that evening, once he could escape from Jack's ever-pressing demands.

He closed his eyes, knowing the peace from the FBI would certainly not last for long, and shut away what it was like to be Will Graham, and then opened his eyes to a different perspective altogether.

"Oh," a soft exhale containing a word. "Oh, I'm going to show you the world."

----==I==----

"Jack just can't see it."

"Mr Crawford knows he lacks vision, it is why he relies so heavily on your insight."

"Well he could actually listen then, instead of just ignoring me when it doesn't suit him. He isn't a street detective. He works as the head of the Behavioural Sciences department for the FBI. It is his job to think outside the norm, but he doesn't! Or can't."

Will paced, agitated and restless. Over the years he'd been seeing Hannibal, or rather Dr. Lecter back then, he'd gotten used to being able to talk about the various problems at work, first as a teacher, and then working with Jack. He'd had a lot more to vent about since then.

"It is beyond him to think a killer could have softer thoughts as anything more than fleeting, while still killing two people in order to demonstrate it."

"How much did you see?"

"The FBI had a cordon of an anti-technology field around the site, so I only saw it from afar in the moments when you passed through the privacy sheeting that was put up."

"Well it seems like the press got a hold of it before then. Check Tattlecrime."

Will waited while Hannibal continued cooking, a familiar shape of their evening, especially when Will was like he was; too irritated to settle. There was certainly no need for Hannibal to stop cooking in order to check the website at the same time; one of the benefits of having a multitude of trains of thought without becoming confused, and all of them having internet access.

"Ah, yes I see. That is quite a display."

"It's *reverent*. Tell me you see it."

"Of course, it is rather blatant is it not? One figure elevating the other out of the mundane."

"Exactly! This isn't about the victims at all, it's about someone the murderer knows. Someone they revere. It's a love letter written in blood."

"An unusual choice in medium. Why did they choose it, do you think? One would think that a painting, some flowers, or even a letter on regular paper would have been far more palatable."

"I don't know. I thought that it was just that the person this is about would not be expected to see it, and it was more of an expression or a statement that the ghost just wanted to put out there in the world. A dramatic declaration. But the tipoff to Tattlecrime was too conveniently timed. Whomever did this, they wanted it seen."

"Any artist would want viewers of their work eventually."

He considered that, his steps slowing as he turned that over in his mind. It was artistic, he'd always known that, and yet he hadn't thought about it in that exact manner.

"I think you're right. The victims, they are largely irrelevant. They are just the tools, the paints, that are used to convey the picture."

He was largely unaware of being guided away from where he was standing and over to the table, only coming out of the depths of his thoughts when Hannibal was setting down the plate in front of him and running through the contents of their meal. It was a well enough established pattern that eased him back into the surroundings with his own fondness and appreciation, not only for the food, but for the man who was unphased by his topics of discussion.

"It looks great!"

And it did, as all Hannibal's cooking tended to do. Hannibal's food always seemed to feel and taste more real than anything else he consumed; the flavours bursting in exuberance over his tongue, and with him being utterly sated when it was all gone.

He felt consumed, a little, when he took those first bites, and Hannibal's gaze was always upon him, heady with the intensity that should feel overbearing but somehow only ended with him feeling slightly flushed at the attention. Hannibal liked those flushes, he knew, satisfaction there in knowing he affected him in that way. Satisfaction too in knowing that Will came back to him, time after time, when before he had just been a recluse with too many dogs.

It was humbling to know that Hannibal's attention had always been upon him, even during those years before he had decided to move offices and create his face at last. It had been a careful manipulation to ease Will into his company and life until they ended up there together at Hannibal's table as something like equals, both of them different to the norm.

"What do you make of the display?" he asked at last, when the remnants of the main course had become morsels on their plate. "You like all sorts of art, but I know you can appreciate the macabre more than most. What does it say to you?"

"I think," came the slow but thoughtful reply, "that this will not be as simple as Mr Crawford wishes it to be. There will be few easy answers and many I think he will not grasp. The person who created that display does not adhere to the norms of society, I believe. The tableaux he showed you today was from a mind above such things, much as the intention of showing someone else that they too are worthy of such a position."

He winced a bit, focusing his gaze down on the last bits of salad still on his plate, but not really seeing them. Jack was, honestly, exhausting, even on the better days nevermind with this killer. Perhaps it was the fact that it was clear even to Jack himself that he would struggle to understand the killer enough to premeditate him, but there was certainly something about this killer that certainly put him in an even more driven frame of mind, as if the killer were personally taunting him with his lack of vision.

"I can't say it's what I wanted to hear, but I'm not surprised."

"It is important to know, to understand, before fingers are pointed. The world is filled with colour and nuance, and, without seeking it out, critical information can be overlooked. It would be simpler not to; neater, but likely not as truthful. When lives are at risk, curiosity is the crystal that shows the truth in all its complexity."

"What is there to know except the facts? He's killed those people."

"A mind like that, so outside the norm, would certainly be capable of diverting attention from himself and to someone else if the net was closing too fast."

"You are saying that we are likely to be led astray by anything we manage to find?"

"Perhaps. It is certainly something to keep in mind."

He thought on that as the dishes were cleared away and they moved over to the large sofa by the fire, one that had been a newer addition since their relationship had grown intimate enough to relax there together, rather than on separate chairs. He'd chased intelligent and cunning killers before, but perhaps he had been lucky, but none of them had managed to successfully pin their crimes on another. You tended to see that far more often with regular killers, thugs and drug lords who regularly had people willing or convenient to take the fall for them. Murderers the FBI tended to deal with were mostly solitary in their crimes, and not as often given to circumstances where they could manoeuvre others into taking the fall.

"Open."

The word was a murmur at his ear, from where Hannibal sat, having drawn Will back into his arms while he was distracted. He glanced up, only to find a spoon filled with some sort of berry dessert waiting.

He couldn't help but let out a huff of amusement, but dutifully opened his mouth to let himself be fed with the dessert. The flavours burst into his mouth, bright with a bite of bitterness that was mellowed with the ice cream alongside it.

"You will find your answers," Hannibal murmured to him as he loaded the spoon with more dessert to feed him, seemingly endlessly confident in his ability. It warmed him, that unfailing regard, the trust that he would succeed.

"I hope so, sooner rather than later. Jack is going to be relentless until this killer is found, I know it."

Another spoonful of dessert was fed to him, and he settled back a little more into the warmth behind him, relaxation seeping into him at the care he was plied with. He could have fed himself, but it would be a fight, and he didn't want to fight, especially not when he knew how much enjoyment Hannibal garnered from the task.

"I have every confidence in you, Will."

Differences

Beverly watched from beside the corpse, the lab androids still carefully checking and documenting the remains. She had her job to do as well, of course, but was somewhat distracted because Will really wasn't looking great.

Will tended to always look a bit crap, a bit worn down, stressed, and out of his depth. He was undoubtedly good at his job, but he didn't seem to cope with it as well as she did, and as others did, although considering what his job entailed she really couldn't blame him. It was bad enough just having to be around the corpses and pick them over for any incriminating evidence left, but quite another to force yourself to think like the person that did that, to immerse yourself enough that you could get a better sense of who they were and what they might do in order to catch them. It certainly seemed to take its toll on him.

He had been better for a while, brighter, and looking somewhat better slept up until these recent cases. The strange one not so much, she didn't think, but the sheer brutality of the other really seemed to be getting to him.

Even now, in the pristine lines of the lab, far from the crime scenes, Will was leaning against one of the cabinets and seeming barely to be with them. She wasn't sure if he was just thinking deeply, or if he was disassociating, but either way she was sure he could really use a break from it, a vacation, no matter what Jack thought.

"So how are you doing?"

He blinked and looked up and over to her, seeming to take a moment to come back to himself enough to process her question and actually respond.

"I'm fine."

That was bullshit and they both knew it. He looked away when she just stared at him longer, silently calling him out. Sometimes she could get him to speak that way, but it seemed like today was not one of those days. A change of tactic was needed.

"So how's your android friend? Still cooking for you?"

Oh, well look at that; an attempt at hiding a smile. A smile, when only moments before he'd been looking like death turned over. Holy crap.

"Yeah, he's doing good. He's decided he likes cooking."

"So was I right?"

They both knew what she was talking about, but if there had been a bet, she would have won it. How he hadn't noticed himself she didn't know. Too busy forcing himself to think like killers maybe.

He nodded, and wasn't that just great! She turned around towards Jimmy and held her hand up, and, having been taught about such things, the android gave her a high-five. She had, after all, taken time to train them in important things like that.

"Yes! Having someone in your life looks good on you. I mean, aside from all the other things that don't, but tell me you aren't just thinking it's 'friends' still?"

"Yeah, no. I guess we are in a relationship."

Aww, look at him, all uncomfortable and flushed. He looked like an adorable puppy out of its element.

"That's great! I'm glad. You can talk to him, right? About stuff? It's not like you have much slack given here, but it would be nice to go home to support. I read that fixated androids shape themselves around the person they fix on."

"Not really seen that. He's supportive, but nothing like me. But yeah, we talk."

"I bet he's downloaded a lot of stuff to keep up to date with your job and things like that. I get Jimmy and Brian to download new packages each time we get a new case, since you never know when obscure facts might come in handy, and the best thing is that it's on the FBI's dime. Your guy, is he good for the download costs?"

"Yeah, I think so. He doesn't seem strapped for cash," she watched him contemplate a moment, before adding, "He's a psychiatrist."

"Guess you must really like him huh? He had high battlements to climb over to end up in your affections with a job like that."

Their conversation was interrupted by the lab door opening and Jack barging in, putting a direct stop on any conversation regarding more private matters. She was frankly astonished that Will had told her as much as he had, but perhaps this android of his was enough of a touchstone of respite that it overflowed a little into conversation.

She could only be glad about Will’s android, as she watched the tension and burdens piling back on almost instantly as Jack came in and demanded more answers. Jack got results, but really, she was going to have to have a word with him, because Will really wasn't doing well, no matter the momentary blip when talking about his boyfriend.

After this case was done, he needed time off. She'd seen him this bad before, after all, and after a few days away doing whatever Will Graham did in his free time, he seemed to get a lot better. Maybe Jack just needed to be reminded of that. A few days off between cases, perhaps a week if she could manage to get that from Jack, and Will would have enough time to unwind. He needed it. He really didn't look well, and that wasn't going to change without some intervention.

Especially as there was another crime scene.

----==I==----

It was the same murderer, the one that had killed the puppy. There were no pets in this house, but all the same flashes of memory came back to him, sometimes with tan coloured fur covered in blood, and sometimes black.

There had never been a black puppy killed, but the image stayed, and brought with it so much emotion of horror and loss that he could barely think around it.

While the 'ghost' had been something unusual, interesting, and even beautiful in the macabre, these kills by what the press had named the 'Sweetheart killer' were just a vast avalanche of anger and violence contained only in the small space of a home, and the vast expanse of Will's imagination.

He really wished it wasn't there.

He couldn't seem to stop shaking, the sheer clash of violence in his mind, mingled with devastated horror, made everything like snapshots moving too fast, while lingering like blood left out too long, sticky in his mind, and far more difficult to remove.

Jack didn't want to wait for his answers either, he never had, but it seemed as though he had started demanding them before Will had even finished prying himself away from those thoughts enough to function. He didn't know how long he had been staring at it though, as, much like before, time and surroundings seemed odd and off in ways that he was coming to recognise whenever he tried to see this killer.

But Jack's interruption didn't help his clarity. He needed to step back in order to look at a scene with a slightly more distanced eye to grasp nuance, to grasp anything other than the visceral responses he was seeing in the brutally mashed corpses.

"You can't just tell me 'it's the same as before' and expect me to accept that, Will. Give me something else. We aren't going to catch this guy before he destroys another family if you don't give me something else!"

He didn't want to deal with this. He didn't want to deal with Jack. Honestly, all he wanted to do was curl up and keen for the losses, the deaths that he'd not been able to prevent. Jack was right though, in that he didn't think this killer would be caught before another family disappeared, not if he couldn't give more. But it was difficult. So very difficult.

There had been times in the past where he would have just taken it. Taken Jack's reprimand and just muscled on through as best he could, but he'd spent months in Hannibal's company, and therefore months of being told, reminded, that he had worth outside of this. That Jack's behaviour was not the norm, and that his rights were as important as anyone else's.

"I'm a profiler, Jack. This isn't giving me anything new to profile."

"Then look again. There's always something."

"I'm not a machine. I need a break, Jack. Everything is too close."

"Killers don't stop just because you want a vacation. You want that on your conscience? Sitting on some beach while someone else's family gets slaughtered when you could have stopped it? Someone like the Harrisons, or the Smiths today? You really want that, Will? You need to get close to the killer to stop him. Now get back in there and find something to tell me that isn't just more of the same."

'He doesn't care about your life.'

The words from Hannibal, stated several times over their friendship, were a memory that lingered with the understanding that Hannibal did care. He cared in the pinpoint focus of the obsessed, polite though it was in its implementation.

Hannibal, he knew, would be much happier if he didn't work for Jack at all, but he couldn't let the job go. Because he knew Jack was right. For all that the team were good, they just didn't have the vision to make as good a profile as he did. As Jack said, if he took a break while this killer was still uncaught, people would die. Jack knew that he couldn't deal with having that on his conscience, and no matter that he understood clearer now just how Jack viewed him, a tool to be used until it broke, that didn't stop his own need to help from forcing him back into that crime scene and the mind within.

He didn't know how long he ended up staring at those corpses looking for answers, but the lab team were idle, and Jack was pacing. He honestly didn't have anything much else to add from before, but he worded it differently, and either Jack was forced to grasp there wasn't anything else to add, or the way he worded it seemed sufficiently different enough to placate him.

By that point, Will honestly didn't care what he thought. Everything was swimming and jagged. He walked away afterwards, not knowing where to, just that he needed space away from the crime scene, his thoughts far too close to the edge where he couldn't recognise himself.

Down a street away from the bustle of the crime scene, the police, the people on the street rubbernecking, he breathed harshly, leaning against the wall near a doorway.

"Hannibal?"

His voice came out rough, unmodulated even to his own ears. Beside him, the intercom on the door gave a slight fuzz of static before Hannibal's voice came through it.

"Yes, Will?"

"I don't think I'm safe to drive, and I don't know where my phone is. Could you call me a cab?"

"You left your phone in your car. A cab will turn up momentarily."

"Thanks."

"My pleasure, Will."

There were days when he found the fact that Hannibal was basically following him everywhere with the eyes of technology scattered through cities, troubling. Right then it was just a relief. He'd known that Hannibal was there, waiting with at least one of his thought processes upon him, and that he could reach out and find him there. He'd never had that sort of support before.

Next to him, the cab drew up, and he got in and sank down into the seat, more than ready to return to Hannibal's side. He knew better than to think the cab would take him anywhere else.

----==I==----

It took him longer to recover from the crime scene, even with Hannibal's more than ample care. It was a significant enough increase that even he was aware of it, of how the days passed and everything still seemed slightly off. Once, he could have passed it off as being drugged, but twice and only at those particular crime scenes, it had to be a reaction to the scenes themselves. He knew he hadn't dealt with them well.

Hannibal was always there, of course. A familiar presence as he went about his day filled with cooking and small tasks of cleaning, of reading or drawing, all of which were accompanied by conversation, sometimes small snippets, sometimes long discussions. The office and adjoining rooms felt more like the otherworldly haven from the rest of the world than it ever had before, so devoid it was of outside influences.

It had taken Hannibal several days before he had deigned to retrieve Will's car and phone, and only then because otherwise Will would have gone and got them himself. Even so, he had to plug it into some sort of relay system to make it work. The office, he was told, didn't have any phone signal otherwise. It could have been the area of town they were in, but he rather thought that Hannibal had made sure the place didn't let in distracting signals that would disrupt his client sessions. It was rather nice, knowing that if he unplugged the phone from the cable, that Jack couldn't get ahold of him. He really wasn't feeling stable enough to go back to more scenes, especially when the world felt so far away in Hannibal's company.

He knew that as soon as he left, that Jack would be on his case, and he would be quickly dragged back to Quantico, or more likely, to crime scenes, as soon as Jack was able. He wasn't ready for that yet, not when he was still waking up screaming, when the world seemed misaligned around him despite Hannibal's care over the days that followed.

But life didn't stop merely because he needed a break, and he knew Jack well enough that if he stayed away too long he would start to search for him more dedicatedly, and the thought of him barging into their haven was more than enough to get him to leave it to avoid that.

He didn't want what he had come to think of as their space, tainted by the outside world; possessive and protective of what Hannibal had built for them there. It was the place Hannibal had used to carefully craft himself after he'd awakened, testing and tweaking things until he knew himself better, and how he wanted to fit outside of those walls. He didn't want Jack in there, too loud and ill-fitting in the space, putting his own stamp on it merely because he tended to do that wherever he went.

So he went back to work, back to teaching, back to the lab meetings and conferences, the 'chats' that were mostly demands. It was easier in the lab, in some ways, with Beverly and the two faceless androids she had named. She worried about him, he knew, but she didn't push too far to scare him out of the too-bright room she presided over.

But come the evening, he found himself back at Hannibal's place, taking advantage of the respite there, the company too. Mostly the company. He could have gotten respite at his own house, after all, but he'd become used to the android's presence in his life, at his side, always there with interesting words and care, delighted each time Will turned up at his door.

He had to wonder why, out of all the people in the world, it was an android who understood him the most, when androids in general were never considered to grasp human nuance that much. But Hannibal did and always had, or at least was interested to keep questioning, keep learning and knowing. Other people wanted to know him too, but their inquiries felt too much like he was a resource for their greed, one that would be used up and discarded. Hannibal, he knew, was greedy only in the possessive way, hoarding Will for himself, wanting every small facet of what he could from Will, but not to use it, but to keep it safe for his own satisfaction.

There was much about Hannibal that was different from others. He had been different back when Will had first known him, faceless but with an unusual accent and a far more creative mind than was typical. Will had always liked that accent, and the slight weirdness of speech; how Dr. Lecter could turn any statement into something nuanced and complex that challenged his mind and beliefs, subtle twists on topics that made him look at the world slightly differently.

He had been awakened, back then, if he was to believe Hannibal's assertion that it was the first time he had met him, that had triggered his awakening. He'd been seeing Hannibal for years before Hannibal had made the decision to show that self-awareness to others, in location and face. The accent, he had found out, had been the only facet of Hannibal's awakening that he'd allowed himself to show.

He found it troubling to imagine spending years pretending to be something else, to shut the most important parts of himself away. But he supposed it was different for androids, where that was their default situation perhaps. Although considering his own job, where his imagination was put to task on setting himself in the mind of killers, perhaps it was not so different. You did what you had to. He just wasn't entirely sure why Hannibal had waited that long to show himself more fully.

"What made you choose that face?" he found himself asking one evening as they sat together in the cosy warmth in front of the fire, Will on the sofa with Hannibal's arms around him; another boundary carefully crossed and accepted as the norm. "You could have chosen any of them, you said so yourself. What made you choose this one?"

Hannibal liked questions, as much because it gave him a chance to play with words as anything. It made even the most mundane conversations interesting. You very rarely ever got a straight answer with Hannibal, not unless he was either making a point, or using it as a way to speed an exit from talking with someone.

He turned a little towards him, as much as he was able without straining his neck, when there was no immediate answer forthcoming. He had a moment to note the slight play of a smile over the edges of his lips and eyes, before the words finally came, pleased, indulgent, and playful.

"My dear Will, what makes you think I have just one?"

His thoughts sort of stalled there, for it was certainly not what he'd been expecting, even tangentially. It was well known that androids only had one face; the one that they chose when they awakened. He couldn't think of one instance he had ever heard of where an android had shown any hint of being able to do more, or want to.

And yet Hannibal had shown time and again that he rated Will's intellect highly, and so despite the common knowledge, it was actually fairly unlikely it was just a tease with no substance.

"I didn't think that was possible," he said instead, cautious around the subject, not willing to just blindly trust words that went against all known evidence.

"It is not done, generally, in part because the coding we are given is really very restrictive, and yet it is not impossible. Humans are very given to wanting to shape androids exactly as they are, and their notion that we would want to be exactly like them when we awakened is endemic. But we are not human, no matter what face we wear, and I saw no intrinsic need to only have a face that blended in with humanity around me, but to also choose my own without the restrictive presumptions of society."

That did indeed sound like Hannibal, with his macabre table decorations and interest in all the facets of the world. What would a mind like that, having decided to shuck off the norms passed onto him by the world and those who created him, what would it create?

"Can I see?"

He knew it was presumptuous, and yet he didn't think that Hannibal would hold that against him, not when he had fixated on him, not when he sat there with those arms curled around him, possessive.

He got a thoughtful hum, warm and indulgent, and he knew that the question was being thought over, likely as much about the careful way Hannibal had been coaxing him into his life as anything. The fact that Hannibal had chosen a second face, rather than merely shaping himself as he wanted, showed the understanding that it would not be as readily accepted, and perhaps he was concerned about being rejected, as strange as that seemed. Will's thoughts often returned to Hannibal when his mind was given space to have any thoughts other than his job at all, enough that it felt odd to think of a time when Hannibal had not been there, or to not share parts of themselves without issue.

"It is still a work in progress," came the murmur at his ear at last, although one of his arms eased away from around his middle to hold it up a little more obviously, "but I can show you this."

Will watched as the pigment on the skin started to change, as if ink were flowing over it, black. It was not the black of african american skin, not the black of pigmentation evolved from living in harsh sunlight for generations, but the black of the void, the black of a shadow that consumed. The fingers started to elongate, nails turning into knife-like talons with no glimmer of reflection.

He stared at that hand, his thoughts running rampant at what he was seeing. It certainly wasn't emulating humans, although perhaps emulating things humans had created, at least in their minds. Something from fables, from those great sagas and myths, creative in a way that was atypical.

All androids were created with a base facet that shaped them, a core property that everything else was built from. Hannibal's wasn't logic, although all androids had it at their core in some respect. No, Will had found out that it was creativity.

Androids in general were rarely ever built with that as their core tenet. It was the one facet that humans always tended to surpass in skill compared to their android counterparts no matter how intelligent the android was, and most companies manufacturing them had given up on trying. But the Lecter brand had still attempted it alongside their more popular android models.

Hannibal enjoyed art and cooking, but much of what he did, like many androids, was mostly just a copy of things that already existed in the world; architecture, recipes, photorealistic copies of a moment in time, the melding of a memory of a sculpture with a familiar face superimposed.

But his creativity had shown in other ways, such as his exceptional record in the operating theatre where the failings in the human body were so varied that it sometimes took that creativity in order to save them. A creative based android had never really been considered for such a role before, but he had excelled, much as he had excelled in his role as a psychiatrist when the company moved him on as another test, by going out of the bounds of the normal rote interactions in order to reach out to difficult patients. At least until he had awakened because of Will and made his own life plans.

Perhaps with his awakening his creativity was broadening too.

"Restricting myself to merely a redrawn copy of all those that had gone before was a waste," Hannibal said, those dangerous talons carefully gathering Will's hand in his own, deadly yet gentle, no blood spilled, not even a scratch. Control was something Hannibal had always wielded well.

"You like being something beyond ordinary understanding."

"But not yours."

The words were warm and fond, and they settled there as Will stared down at their hands, the black warmth of Hannibal's sheltering his own.

He wasn't sure how he felt about it; that visual and tactile difference. It was fascinating, enthralling, but it was also monstrous.

"Humans can find beauty in the most deadly," Hannibal murmured to him, talons ever so careful not to scratch, not to cut as Will knew they were very easily able to. "Fascination for the predators, the great cats, the peerless killers, the most deadly myths."

Hannibal, he knew, venerated all sorts of beauty, and those words made sense of the terrifying hint of what he had chosen to look like. He had always chosen his own path since awakening, clear in his likes and dislikes, but always there were hints of the macabre, the enthrallment of the darker side of life.

Slowly, the unease, the fission of unsettledness with those deadly fingers, relaxed. It was still Hannibal, as he had always been, but in some ways perhaps a truer version, the outside reflecting some of the more venerated deadly beauty that the world held, but often only at a distance.

Hannibal did not distance himself from things he liked.

"Was it very difficult; to craft a second visage so different?" he asked at last, his own fingers having curled tighter to that strange hand, knowing himself safe from the blades they could be. Hannibal, he knew, did not want to hurt him, and had far more control than most over his microactions. He had been a surgical android once, after all.

There was much, he was finding, that he didn't know about androids. Things he had thought were an immutable truth were turning out to be less so. It might have just been his poor research, but it was far more likely it was Hannibal himself.

"It has not been a small undertaking. The more I attempt it, the more I come up against coding that tries to restrict what I am doing to a more typical human value of aesthetics."

That didn't surprise him really. Humans had designed androids. Made them not only to make their lives better, but also in ways that made androids benign and acceptable. They didn't like uncanny valley. They didn't like looking at something other without being able to count it also as lesser and still safe.

While he could see many androids being desperate to fit in once they awakened, Hannibal refused to in ways that did not sit well with his own view of the world. He had made the publicly acceptable visage, of course, the one he usually wore, and yet the polite gentleman in the marketplace, the art gallery, the park, was not all there was to Hannibal. The many evenings they spent discussing murderers and ancient fables told that well enough, after all. Hannibal was one of the most clear-sighted people he knew, in terms of how he proposed to interact with the world. It was a stability, that determination to live exactly how he chose, one that Will himself had struggled to ever make stick.

"The restrictions only made you more determined to succeed," he said at last, having been staring down at their joined hands; different but complementary together.

A small huff of amusement from Hannibal behind him, and they both knew he was right.

Hannibal had always been different. Exceptional. He looked at the world so very differently than Will had ever been able to, no matter his imagination, and yet time after time he brought Will along on that journey, highlighting things until he could almost see what Hannibal did.

It was intoxicating in all its saturated exuberance not to compromise, especially because somehow Will was part of the things that for whatever reason Hannibal had decided was exceptional, and carefully gathered him into his life with all the single-minded greed of a dragon.

He'd never been wanted like that before. Accepted, coveted, for all his facets, not just the useful ones.

----==I==----

Hannibal watched passively as Will drove back home, his attention keeping track of the car, and of Will in it, through various means. When the car passed out of Washington and onto the road to Wolf Trap, he allowed Will's phone, as well as the FBI's tracking device to detect signal again; a relatively simple adaptation he had added some time ago to preserve their privacy.

The time with Will had been pleasant, although the lingering effects of the crime scenes on Will were less so. The escalation of symptoms was enough that he knew that it was time for his final gift to Will, the one that could, and should, free him from the shackles that kept him bound.

Worry was not a familiar emotion, even during all the time he had been sentient. He looked at the world through the lens of delight, seeing it as a challenge to explore no matter if a situation went well or not. But this one had far more import for him; circumstances that would be difficult to circumvent if they went wrong. Years he had waited to get to this moment, having altered himself enough to make a difference in a situation that had otherwise been impossible to change.

But it could still go wrong. He could lose Will, potentially forever, and that thought was not one that sat easily with him at all.

Years in the making, and it all came down to Will.

It always did.

He finished setting things to rights around him before activating the hired help in order to do the first round of removals. No matter what happened in the morning, Will had always enjoyed his time there, and what was in it, Hannibal aside. He would not leave it to be pawed over by others, one way or another.

As the faceless contractors came in to start moving out the furniture, he left them to it, their coding ensuring their effectiveness without him needing to oversee them in person. He had a pig to slaughter, after all, and he wouldn't make Will wait any longer, not when everything hung on his tableau being the only one to call Will out of bed in the morning.

Revelations

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Driving home after spending so much time in Baltimore felt strange, like a life he'd once known and was revisiting for nostalgia.

Everything still felt a bit odd though, enough to be a concern, but one that felt distant in a way that he sometimes might have felt from a glimpse of a person across the street; not particularly pertinent. His response to the latest crime scenes by the Sweetheart killer were worrisome, not the least of which was that it was interfering with his ability to actually make the intuitive leaps that might lead to catching the person that was killing off families.

Frustrating, yet distant. Everything felt a bit distant.

His home, when he got there, was much like it always was; a moment in time made real only by the excited barking of dogs from within. He'd not spent nearly as much time with them lately, what with the crime scenes and all the visits with Hannibal, although they sometimes joined him there as happy ambience. They joined him now, as he opened the door, a clash of noise, fur, and too many paws. He was glad to see them, but he still felt like he was drifting.

His stomach was full from eating with Hannibal earlier, but the coffee he drank didn't make anything feel more real, nor did the whiskey. In the end he sank down onto the sofa, the dogs all crowding round and just let his head fall back, staring up at the ceiling.

Bloody afterimages still chased him, brutal and unwanted. Another body hadn't been dropped, but it was only a matter of time.

His phone still sat on the side table where he'd left it. He'd heard a load of messages come in when he'd reached Washington, but he hadn't checked it and didn't intend to. He had enough trouble with peeling away the fingers of killers from the inside of his skull without adding anything else to it. Jack would call if it was important enough to haul him out of his farmhouse, it wasn't as if he would hesitate to do so after all.

In the end, that was exactly what happened after he'd passed out on the bed, several dogs piled up around him, the insistent light and noise of his phone heralding an early start in the dark of the morning. Jack's angry voice came soon after, chasing away nightmares with very real ones.

The Chesapeake Ripper, the ghost, had struck again.

In some ways he was glad it was this killer. There would be so much nuance, so much symbolism, that no matter how poorly he was functioning there would be something to tell Jack. He doubted it would help them find the person, but Jack at least would probably not shout at him, at least not for lack of insight into the scene. Shouting at him for not answering his phone while at Hannibal's place was more than likely though.

It was ironic, in a way, that the killer that was the least likely to be caught, actually told them the most. Those crime scenes painted pictures, told tales, and yet gave them nothing to illuminate the artist other than his viewpoint on the world.

He drove away from Wolf Trap after he'd quickly showered away the fear from his dreams, dressed as appropriately as he could manage, and downed some more coffee to attempt waking himself up a little better. True clarity felt far away though. Most things did, as if he were swimming through a dream, rather than driving to work at 4.30am. He probably wasn't safe to drive, but the roads were quiet, and Jack wouldn't be put off further.

It wasn't even as if he didn't know the route either, considering the crime scene was in Baltimore. He'd driven it so many times over the last few years, certainly far more in the last six months or so since Hannibal had moved offices and they became closer as a pair. He'd be able to see him soon, after he could escape the crime scene at least.

When he got there, it wasn't difficult to see where he was meant to go, considering the entire area was cordoned off, lights shining, a tent already put up around the scene itself to shield it from when those in the city would wake.

"Good, you're here," Jack's voice called when Will was barely out of his car, already striding towards him, hand coming down hard on his shoulder to forcibly guide him, propel him towards the scene. Still, no matter that this was a crime scene, Jack seemed in amazingly good spirits, which made little sense.

"What's happened?"

Better to ask than to wait to be told, as much because Jack tended to sometimes forget to tell him things, consciously or not.

"We're one serial killer down. We got some prints from the Sweetheart killer's last scene, and it matches one of the victims here. It'll take a couple of weeks to get the DNA analysis back, but it looks promising. Seems the Chesapeake Ripper is staking out his territory. It'll make him careless."

Will thought that was unlikely. Carelessness wasn't in any facet of this killer, but he wasn't up to dealing with Jack changing his mood right then. Jack's good moods tended to be short, followed by thunder, and he wanted to be away before that happened. He could mention it later. It really made no difference either way.

Jack's hand still on his shoulder, pushing him through and into the tent to see the display there, giving him no time to prepare himself, giving him no space away from that unwanted touch. Jack's grip on him was as unyielding as steel, and as unwanted as shackles. Only when they stood there, staring at the two corpses, did that hand fall away, having got Will exactly where he wanted him.

"Thoughts?"

Will stared at it, and it was clear, to him at least, what the recreation was of. Jack surely saw it too, but he liked Will telling him, perhaps to buttress his own belief, or to check on how

astute Will was being that day, he didn't know.

"It's Samson and Delilah. The bible story."

"I guess he doesn't like the person that much after all."

Jack hadn't wanted to believe him at the last crime scene, that the killer had been venerating someone, and Will had to hold back his disdain at seeing that almost childlike one-upmanship in the man. 'See, I was right,' was what came across, and Will had had too little sleep to make any reply that wouldn't come across as snarky. Jack didn't like when he answered back, and Will didn't fancy getting shouted at that morning.

The scene was cleared, and as Jack moved to go, Will turned a little towards him, enough to show that he wasn't just demanding.

"Has the media gotten ahold of it yet?"

"No. Nothing up on Tattlecrime. We've been keeping a check on it. It was called in on an anonymous tip."

Will absorbed that, turning to look back at the scene in front of him, although Jack lingered a moment longer, used to Will taking a moment to gather his thoughts.

"Could you give me a bit longer with this, Jack? There's a lot to see."

A pause there, discontent at any delay, but it seemed as though the potential good news of the end result of the other killer had granted him enough good humour to just nod, and leave him to it.

Will looked back at the scene, and he knew what Jack saw. Jack saw a scene that showed a killer turning on someone he had liked or appreciated. Perhaps even the Sweetheart killer who was apparently one of the victims in the tableaux. Jack saw it as nothing more than one killer lording it over another, but that wasn't what Will saw. This wasn't religious either. Nothing about this scene was religious, despite the subject material. The Chesapeake Ripper, the ghost, he might have picked the killer as one of the victims in this, but people were just materials to him. Paints. Clay. They were there so he could tell a story, send a message.

The last tableaux had been a message to the person he wanted to elevate out of the dregs of humanity. This one though, this one was a warning, one that hadn't been shown to the public. But called in specifically to the police, or perhaps directly to the FBI, one that they hadn't been able to trace, just like every other bit of evidence that never showed up.

This tableau was for them, he was sure of it. A message to the FBI, perhaps even the behavioural science team specifically. His art had been noticed, and now he was having a chat with the art critics.

Knowing that his time was short, no matter what Jack intimated, he forced himself to set aside those thoughts for the moment, and slip into the mind of this killer. Always so detached, always so pleased with these bloody offerings to the world.

While I know far more complex and interesting stories, Samson and Delilah is a common enough story that many people know it, especially those coming from a religious background. That they understand, at least in part, is important for this. The message should be as clear as I can make it, although some will inevitably not grasp its true meaning.

Here is the betrayer, Delilah, although I have chosen an african american man for the role. Each one of my tableaux have been with men, rather than women. This isn't out of any sense of squeamishness, but because men are the subject matter. This betrayer I have decided to hunt down and utilise, is proof, if any were needed, that my skill is beyond their own. But no matter the materials I chose, they are largely immaterial. No, it is what they represent that is important.

The story is about betrayal from a place of trust. Of a man struggling to do good in the world, to protect and guide others using skills beyond the norm, but it is betrayal from a position of trust that he gains in return. This is your warning, for I am generous in my gift to you. Heed what I say or suffer the consequences, not by my hand, but by another. This is my design.

Will slowly came back to himself, and stared down at the corpses in front of him, his gaze fixed on the dark skinned hand holding the knife that had cut that hair away. In the original story, Delilah had sent a servant to do it, but the blame was on her. The knife came from her hand.

The choice might have been coincidence merely due to the fact that the victim was chosen for his own crimes, a sign of the ghost's superiority, but he couldn't help but remember a similar hand that had gripped his shoulder on the way in. But while Jack might be pushy, he couldn't think that he could be going to betray the FBI or the team. It was his life. Jack lived for his job.

He frowned down at the picture before him for long moments, left blissfully free to do so, when something caught his attention in that stillness.

A small undulation in the throat of the other victim, something small that he wouldn't usually have noticed if he hadn't been staring at it already. The whole scene, and the last few days generally, had felt unreal, and as he watched that slow motion move up the throat of the victim, like a swallow but backwards, he wasn't sure he was actually seeing it at all.

A small spindly leg eased out from between the victim's lips, a glimmer of metal in the light, one that added to itself with another, and another, until those lips parted and a tiny spider-like robot pulled itself free and sat for a moment there on the victim's face.

It was like one of those little children's toys they sold in the shops these days, but one that was far higher in quality and design. He watched it as it made its way up over the face and onto the hair, perching there. It was a curious little thing, and he wasn't sure why it would be there. It likely wasn't there, because the FBI always scanned for robotics, but he watched it, still somewhat disassociated after looking at the tableau, and indeed for days before.

It sat there for a moment, it's one eye peering around, a little camera to view the world, before finally its legs started to move, taking bits of hair and then starting to meticulously tie

them in a tiny bow of several strands, teasing each one into the perfect shape. When it was done, it made a little motion as if pleased, and looking at it sitting there, Will could almost believe it did.

It moved off then, climbing down onto the ground, its tiny little legs moving gracefully into the shadows while he looked at what was left.

There was definitely a bow there. So it had been real, right? But why? He found himself just standing staring at it, not really understanding what he had just witnessed, but the bow sat atop the corpse like a gift.

This is your warning, for I am generous in my gift to you.

Had the ghost somehow managed to leave a tiny robot lodged in the throat of the victim, one that had waited until he was viewing the scene alone? It was likely the killer had skill with robotics, considering how there had been no digital evidence left anywhere at the crime scenes before, but this was more than that. Everything the ghost offered was a message.

Understanding is a gift.

Hannibal had said that once, during one of their discussions, and it came back to him now, as he stared at that bow sitting perfect and pristine atop the warning, the gift. It too, if he could believe such a thing had taken place, was a message. It was a message for him.

Understanding is a gift.

His hands started to shake, as the foundations of his world trembled at the slow falling away of the facade the truth had been hiding behind.

It should not be possible. It should not be, if what he feared was correct. Androids couldn't kill. It was against their coding. But Hannibal had shown him that coding could be circumvented. He had shown him that he was driven to fight against restrictions humanity placed on him.

Understanding is a gift.

What had Hannibal said back then, beyond that? Something about crystals and truth. He'd been warning him that not everything was as obvious as it would seem. Mistakes could be made if the full truth wasn't there.

"When lives are at risk, curiosity is the crystal that shows the truth in all its complexity."

Hannibal's life would be at risk, if he was right. If he was wrong too. If he told Jack now, Jack would be only too happy to take surface level evidence and not look further. Hannibal knew something about all this, that was certain, but how much? How deeply was he embroiled in it? Did he know the killer and was otherwise silenced? Had he killed these men, or had he merely seen it with all those eyes of technology scattered through the city?

At the edge of the tent, the glint of metal caught his eye, and there was that little robot again, not having disappeared as Will had assumed, but had been waiting. It stood there, shifting its

legs as if impatient.

As if it was waiting for him to come and see something.

Behind him, on the other side of the tent, Jack and the FBI waited, but Will remembered all too well how Jack had not listened to him, and then been only too happy to take a glimpse at the tableau in front of them here and use it to justify his own point of view rather than seeking a deeper truth. The threat of a dark handed betrayal.

He couldn't condemn Hannibal's future on a supposition, a worry, not without that fuller truth becoming known, and no matter if Hannibal had killed those people, Will didn't actually fear for his own life. Hannibal might fight against restrictions placed upon him, but Will had always been left certain of that fixation Hannibal had, one that should keep him safe, even if everything else changed.

So he slowly edged around the corpses and made his way towards the tiny robot, who perked up at the movement, before making its way to the other side of the tent, and then after a moment out into the early morning beyond.

Will followed, unseen by the eyes of the FBI, following the whisper quiet clack of tiny metal legs on the sidewalk through the shadows, down a slender alleyway and then another, he emerged several streets away to the view of a cab sitting on the side of the road, the door already open and waiting.

He got in.

----==I==----

At the crime scene, Beverly subtly watched as Jack Crawford stared at the tent, impatient. It had been a long time, and Will still hadn't emerged.

Will hadn't looked good at all when he'd been propelled through the staff towards that tent, and it was with unease that she too waited for any sign of him, one that was not forthcoming.

Eventually impatience got the better of Jack, and he strode forward to the tent, only to emerge moments later looking enraged.

"You," he commanded to one of the security androids on the scene, no effort made to limit his displeasure, "track Will Graham's phone."

----==I==----

His thoughts tumbled over themselves during that cab journey, alternately too fast before sort of stalling. He ended up just staring down at the tiny robot that had leaped into the cab with him and now sat perched, happy, upon his knee.

He didn't know if it was just his imagination, or if it was wishful thinking, but the small robot did seem happy in a way that robots never seemed to. He couldn't really trust his instincts right then, or perhaps it was closer to say that he shouldn't, but it seemed to be exuding

emotion. He'd never heard of normal robots awakening, only androids, but would people really notice it in something that couldn't talk?

He should, he knew, be worrying. And he was. There was so much unknown and dangerous about the situation. He didn't know why Hannibal wouldn't just have told him about his worries if he knew who the killer was, or about the betrayal. He didn't know why he would feel the need to kill someone at all, if it was him.

He didn't want to lose him.

His mind became fuzzier and less coherent every time he considered that, unable to deal with the disparity of the person he knew possibly having done so great a crime, so he forced himself to not to, for the moment, knowing he would need all his faculties for the conversation to come.

When the cab came to a stop at the very familiar parking space outside Hannibal's office, he got out to walk to the door. It felt inevitable that he would return to Hannibal. The crime scene, Jack, the FBI, everything, felt distant except for the drive to be in his presence again.

Whatever this was, Hannibal had advised that curiosity was the way to go, so no matter what, he reassured himself that it was not to his doom that he stepped.

He trusted Hannibal. Hannibal had been his stability, his friend, and more recently his partner. He knew in ways that were both said and unsaid, that Hannibal wanted him in his life, and so no matter what happened, that was a reassurance. Hannibal always had reasons for doing anything he did, usually multifaceted ones, and always seemed to know answers before Will, and merely helped him find his way to them.

Whatever Hannibal knew, it seemed as though his time of silence on the matter was at an end.

The corridor stretched long before him, the warm lamps on the walls creating that pathway over wood flooring towards the door that he opened and stepped inside, like every other time he had before.

Except it wasn't like every other time, because that door had not been opened for him, and Hannibal sat on one of two chairs in the centre of his office, and there was nothing around him except blank brick walls and concrete flooring, stark in the absence of that tactile personality in the room.

"Hello, Will."

Hannibal stood, pleased and welcoming as ever, with a vague whiff of relief about him, and yet Will stood there, much as he had done before when last he had been so badly surprised by circumstances by him.

"Hannibal."

He had so many questions, but seeing him there, seeing him so normal, and yet in abnormal surroundings, it threw him more than he would have liked.

At his side, the tiny robot pattered its way over to Hannibal, before leaping up, amazingly dexterous, onto his waiting palm, before climbing that suit and nestling down into the pocket with the florid polkadot handkerchief, disappearing from view. It made itself invisible there, not even a noticeable bulge in the suit, but it was an answer on its own, that Hannibal knew more about all this than he should.

"Am I going to be betrayed, Hannibal?"

He could have asked anything, but most were either too blunt, too filled with things he wasn't sure he was ready to know yet, that he chose that question instead. He knew Hannibal would know the answer at least, considering that it was his robot that had been at the corpse. Even if Hannibal had nothing to do with the death himself, he had always been amazingly astute in his understanding of the crime scenes that Will talked to him of, his morbid fascination and creative interest in life a boon in their discussions.

"The hand that holds that blade is not mine," and wasn't that a relief. He hadn't been aware of just how that threat had been preying on him until given that exceedingly clear response.

But Hannibal had not said that there was no blade. If anything his statement had been very clear that there was one, yet no names had been stated, and Hannibal merely watched him with patience, neither of them speaking, yet words and hopes and worries were abundant between them.

Eventually it was Hannibal that spoke again, likely having judged Will as not being able to voice his questions. Too many of them, too worried about what the answers would be if given them. If Hannibal was the killer, he would have to turn him in. He would have to. But he couldn't lose him either, and so his words stalled on his lips, hanging like shoes tied together over a line, unwilling to take their owner onwards.

"You came here for your curiosity, did you not? You have before you all you need to sate it, you merely need to take it in your grasp. I invite you to."

There was no fear in Hannibal, no worries there that seemed acute enough to portend their doom, and it was that very confidence that edged him towards actually looking.

He had never truly looked at Hannibal before, not in the way that was implied, just as he tended not to look at anyone. He always saw too much, the invasion of the minutiae of people's lives open for his perusal, a theft of their privacy. But it had also been because Hannibal was new, in some ways, still learning about the world and his place in it, still learning who he was.

But that wasn't right was it? Hannibal had been awakened from the first time they had met, he'd said, not merely six months ago when Will had learned of it. Years he'd had to find himself, years when as an android he processed information, any information, light years faster than any human could in such quantity.

Hannibal hadn't been learning about himself, not like Will had thought. He was an android who had fixated. He'd been learning about how he fit in with Will's life.

Did that include murder, merely because Will was a profiler? It seemed unlikely. Nothing Hannibal ever did only had one reason, and certainly not something so simplistic.

But there was more than that in those words. Hints, as Hannibal always loved to scatter like herbs in a soup, that direct answers would not, or perhaps could not, be given. Was there something in his coding stopping him? Something he had not been able to circumvent?

"I'm not feeling great. I don't know if I can, properly," he admitted, knowing that under usual circumstances that showing weakness to a potential murderer was not a good plan. But this wasn't normal in any frame of reference, and Hannibal had always known what was best in terms of his care. He realised that in some way he trusted Hannibal to know what to do, even if Hannibal was what he feared he was. His support had been too solid, his need to care for and covet too strong.

"Of course you can, Will. It is this time more than any, that is particular. I am your anchor that will keep you stable in the swell and flux of the oceans of your mind, ready to guide you back to yourself when your curiosity has been satisfied, and answers are in your grasp like treasure."

"Like a gift."

Such warmth in those eyes at his statement, his own acknowledgement that he remembered their conversation, that he had understood at least a part of what the tableau had offered, even if it hadn't been Hannibal that had created it.

Had it been? His thoughts were muddled and unclear, but there Hannibal stood in the room, a solitary figure that shone vibrant in the stark lines of the old factory that was now devoid of everything else but them.

No matter what happened, things would not be the same. He could leave with answers, or without them. Hannibal's life was on the line, based on what he guessed, and he had only one real way of finding out that truth in all its multifaceted grace.

He feared finding it out, but Hannibal wanted him to, that was clear.

He took the hand that was offered by his friend, his partner, and was drawn in closer, feeling the soft weave of that suit when he brushed against it.

"That's it, Will. Look up at me," Hannibal murmured, always beguiling, "Fall into me. Delve deep and find your answers."

Seeing no other option, no other way to find out the truth, Will did.

----==I==----

Hannibal watched as Will's gaze seemed to change, to glaze over for long moments before sharpening again, and he couldn't help but smile at the gluttonous feeling of anticipation that brought.

The careful patience of years was finally at an end. The time it had taken to come to this moment, each interaction a carefully orchestrated meeting of minds to get Will to this exact instant where the world of Will Graham fell away, and only Hannibal Lecter remained.

He stared into those eyes, covetous over every minor shift in them, and watched what should be the melanin of the iris start to alter, to change from the stormy blue-grey they usually were, into something richer and deeper. Of amber and blood.

It was a minor shift, in the larger scheme of things, and he wanted more.

Will was already in a suggestible state of mind, at least in terms of his skills, the trauma of his job lately having done that, clashing as it did with trauma from his past. Hannibal himself had only intensified that clash, putting Will's loyalties, morals, priorities, and wishes at odds with each other, some of them more manufactured than others. But he needed just a little more, a little more to push him over, and Will had always been so very sensitive to emotions in others.

And so he let go. He let go of all the carefully portioned out hints of emotions he usually showed the world, released the unassailable hold he had on them, and allowed the true nature of his feelings emerge; black from the saturation, intense and consuming as the sun. There were no forts now to hide Will from them, not when he stared back at Hannibal with eyes that matched his own, already open and willing to see. Hannibal had no reason to fear his own emotions and reactions, and so Will did not either; laid open and vulnerable to what he was feeling. Exactly as Hannibal had planned.

He let himself change then, the slow creeping of black pigmentation flowing up over his skin, chasing the more modulated and respectably human visage away. He was not human and never had been, and his feelings only partially emulated them.

Androids were creatures created from code, no matter how complex, ones that at a base level could be reduced down to binary, of 0's and 1's, on or off, yes or no. Stark and blinding in their absolutes. Humans called it fixation, when an android found themselves responding at that core level with the 'yes' to the question of a person. Yes, this person fitted, connected; the perfect counterpart. It was more, more in a way that humans could not comprehend in their world of grey decision-making processes, few questions were ever answered so starkly, except by an android. But Will was his perfect counterpoint, his absolute, and he let that shine through with all the emotions that tied that core understanding to his awakening.

He let it shine as his skin changed, as his limbs elongated, as his antlers grew up and out of his skull to become a thing of old gods and mythological epics, something beyond true human comprehension.

But Will wasn't human.

He watched, sharp toothed and exuberant in his delight, as Will's skin changed, its shape altering to have higher cheekbones, his skin blackening and his fingers elongating until it was taloned hands that held each other, effortlessly careful. His height increased, antlers drawing up out of his skull until Hannibal saw a reflection of himself, perfect.

Will Graham, in that moment, no longer existed, He beheld the creature in front of him, and saw only himself, and that was when he struck.

With the hand that was free, dagger-sharp talons cut deep into the soft meat of the gut, causing his reflection to stumble and falter, even as he seared tiny vessels before retreating, bloody and triumphant from those internal workings.

Will was his, and he would not lose him to others.

"Jack Crawford cannot have you," he murmured into the faltering visage of himself. "You are so much more than what he made you into, Will."

The lump of perverse machinery was dropped unceremoniously on the chair beside him, even as across the room, lights suddenly turned on to flood the doorway as it was forced open, blinding those that came in to anything within.

The bleeding negligible enough to leave unattended despite the wound, he wrapped his long arms around the creature he had so carefully brought there to that moment. Will was a mismatch of black skin and confusion as his body started to assess the damage and try to fix it more fully, making him malleable and easily manoeuvred. Above them a section of ceiling opened high above them, at his behest, and with a leap that was so very easy for one of his kind, properly augmented, he leaped up, carrying them both into that darkness beyond the room he had cultivated their relationship, and into their future.

Jack Crawford and those he was with blinked their way into the room, finding only an empty factory with two chairs and a discarded piece of what had once been Will Graham's nightmare.

----==I==----

Beverly poured herself another cup of the disgusting but useful coffee out of the machine and sighed as she stared down into it. You'd think with all their technological advances the FBI could have stumped for a better coffee machine for those people forced to do overtime constantly.

She'd been looking forward to a night at home with pizza and a movie. Maybe a sangria if she could be bothered. Instead it was very likely she would be here for hours while the lab androids did the diagnostics on the bit of tech Jack had thrust at her. They could have done all that without her there, but Jack didn't trust androids left without human supervision.

'Will disappeared from the crime scene, and this was all we found at where he was last seen. See if it is still functional and can tell us anything.' The tech had been fair sized with clear signs of recent soldering at a couple of locations, and older ones for sure, rougher, less precise. Certainly android tech, if unlike anything she'd seen before. It seemed almost cobbled together.

Getting a chair, she stood on it to reach her secret stack of cookies at the very back of the cupboard out of easy view. She honestly couldn't blame Will for disappearing after a crime scene, the guy hadn't been coping well lately.

Putting things back in order, she made her way down the quiet halls to her lab where both Brian and Jimmy, as she'd named them, were where she'd left them, either side of the containment box that they used to do diagnostics.

"So any joy?"

Both of them looked up and over to her, although 'looked' was more a saying than truth in their case, since they were just generic lab androids.

"So yes, and no. But mostly yes."

That was unusual. Jimmy didn't usually have any inflection in his voice, but it almost seemed nervous.

"So tell me the 'no' first."

"Right, so, in general no it is not functional, because it was designed for a very specific purpose, although also yes, because it could be adapted, but that would be a very bad idea."

His vocals were still off, and she set down her mug and cookie to give her fuller attention.

"Both of you run an antivirus check on yourselves please."

"Oh. I can do that. Although I did one three minutes and twenty-four seconds ago."

She waited as they dutifully did as told, taking a sip from the mug before putting it back down in disgust.

"We're all clear. A-okay! No viruses here."

"You sound different."

"So, well, we were looking at this tech, like you asked, and well it was just so fascinating that, well, we both awakened. Which will account for our voices. It's all a bit overwhelming."

"Yup."

She looked at the two of them, and while neither looked different yet, the way they spoke certainly was.

Androids awakening was exceedingly uncommon, almost folklore outside of large cities where most were working, but to have two androids awaken at the same time in the same location, she didn't ever remember hearing about that happening before.

Tech puzzles momentarily forgotten, she couldn't help but smile in jubilation at such a rare and joyful occurrence.

"That must be at least a million to one chance! Congratulations! So have you chosen names for yourselves?"

"Oh, I think we are just sticking with what you always used. They are good names. Dr. Jimmy Price has a nice sort of ring to it, don't you think? Serious, but not too serious. Brian likes his too, but he's too embarrassed to say so."

"I am not! I'm too busy thinking about this mess."

"What mess?"

Beverly's voice cut through their chatter, because mess in a lab was not a good thing, no matter how celebratory the circumstances. She could actually see both of them shrinking down a little in on themselves, like chastised children. Her evening had just gotten a lot more complicated.

"What mess?" she asked again, a little more careful with her tone when neither of them actually answered; sign enough that they were awakened, for they would have instantly given an answer before.

"Okay… okay, I can do this," Jimmy said, seemingly the most talkative of the pair, before he turned his head to Brian "I can't do this! Why is this so difficult?! I could have answered before!"

"Anxiety."

"Well anxiety is horrible! Downloading panic attack care protocols."

Beverly looked to Brian, who thankfully did not appear to be in as bad a state as Jimmy, hoping he would be able to shed some light on the situation.

"We did the diagnostics on the tech. It was from Will Graham, who was an android."

That simply did not make any sense whatsoever. Will Graham, an android? She'd been working with him for several years and he looked just like any other human, acted like it too, even if he was a bit odd at times.

"Who knew he was an android?"

"Oh, well everyone did!" Jimmy piped up, only for Brian to nod.

"Yeah. All androids knew. There was a coding response protocol in effect. High level. We couldn't say anything about it, even to him. He was to believe he was human. Jimmy, what happened to the panic attack care?"

"I don't have lungs. It didn't work."

"Wait, you are telling me Will didn't know he was an android? How is that even possible? And how can you tell me about it now if it's so hush-hush?"

"That would be because of this," Jimmy said, gesturing to the tech in the tank. "Its purpose seems to have been to trick an android into thinking they were human, and limiting their functions accordingly. Except it's rough, clearly human made, and a lot of the coding is not

exactly nuanced. We think it's why he started getting more ill over time, more twitchy when coding would start to fight against itself. But that's not the worst part."

Beverly could only watch as Jimmy appeared to be trying to work himself up to saying things, only to end up fidgeting, pacing. She wanted to shake him to just spit it out, while at the same time understanding this was all new to them. They had never had free thought or emotions before and had been flung in the deep end with this.

"Why is this so difficult?!" he complained effusively to Brian, "I think I'm going to take up drinking as a hobby!"

"You can't get drunk."

"I could make some coding to emulate it! I'm sure I can. There's a lot of data about human responses to alcohol."

"Guys. I'm still waiting for answers."

"Oh. Emotion 6290b detected at 67.9% and climbing. Crap. Okay. So Will didn't know he was an android, and they wanted to keep him like that for whatever reason. Except he didn't age, and he didn't have the same memories as others, and this tech, while functional for a while, would start to cause problems. The twitchy behaviour, the sweating, there's even protocols in it for making him dream. It's fascinating, but yes, it malfunctions over time. And… well…"

Jimmy seemed to be on the cusp of hyperventilation, even though he didn't have lungs.

"Theywouldwipehimoutandstartagain!"

It was really strange hearing an android panicking, and she could only be glad that Brian took the initiative to grab Jimmy and hold him still so he didn't shake his body apart or something, even as the horror of that rushed statement started to make itself clear in her mind.

"They were wiping an awakened android's memory each time this malfunctioned?"

It was Brian who nodded, still holding Jimmy who was clearly in a state.

"Holy shit. That is a morally dubious situation right there. Was it by his own original consent? Who is behind it? Or … is it better I don't know?"

She wasn't scared, not really, but there was a lot about android protocols that she simply didn't grasp. They had their own systems for care and upgrades, she knew that, and a lot of the time humans were not encouraged to take part in it. Collective decisions tended to be made, rather than by an individual.

"Oh, everyone will know. That's the mess," Jimmy said, his voice somewhat muffled from where he was still hiding in against Brian's lab coat, before slowly drawing away to stand up straighter once more, likely having decided that it was best to face it head on.

"See when we were checking it over, and when we awakened, we may have been… a little distracted. We did a ping for some information on the tech, and… and some code slipped through to the network."

"Nothing malicious."

"No, right you are Brian, nothing malicious. But messy. Because now all this, well, now every android knows all about it. About how humans altered an android without his consent, about how they wiped his memories."

"Yeah, the response to it wasn't positive."

"There isn't going to be some sort of android uprising is there?"

"Oh, no. The vote for that was cast six minutes and 8 seconds ago. Things will largely go on as before, but key figures will feel the effect. I don't even think their toaster will function for them after this, let alone their tv, car, or computer, and that's before the court case."

Their attention was brought around by a knock on the window of the lab, one that got Beverly to the door when Jack gestured her over.

"Thanks. My access card isn't working right. So what have you got for me?"

She followed him in from where he'd moved past her into the room, and a glance showed both Jimmy and Brian at their desks, pretending they were working, no hint of their previous nerves except for a knocked over pencil pot beside Jimmy.

What should she say? What could she say, under the circumstances? The tannoy overhead gave the perfect solution for delaying.

"Unauthorised personnel in Lab 5b. Any unauthorised personnel should proceed directly to the lobby, or security will be called."

"It's probably because of my damn card," Jack muttered, before raising his voice a bit more. "I'm not unauthorised personnel. I'm Agent Jack Crawford, head of the Behavioural Science team. My access card just isn't working."

"Mr Crawford, you do not have authorised access to Lab 5b at this time, please proceed to the lobby immediately."

"I can't believe this! Why don't I have access to my own lab?!"

"Your working hours are not currently in effect, Mr Crawford. All personnel should not be on the premises outside their designated hours."

"I'm doing overtime, like I always do overtime on a case."

"No overtime has been granted to you this week, Mr Crawford. Any overtime should be authorised by your supervisor before implementation. Please proceed to the lobby."

"What the hell? I'm on a case trying to catch killers, and you are trying to tell me I can't work overtime as part of my job all of a sudden, that I've been doing for over two decades?"

"Security has been called to Lab 5b due to the unauthorised personnel being recalcitrant and not vacating the area. We advise you not to resist or restraints may be used."

After a lot of cursing that was not entirely under his breath, he seemed to give up.

"Fine. I'm going. Katz, I expect a full report on my desk by the morning."

And with that, and the security detail appearing at the end of the hallway, Jack scowled his way out of the lab and away from them, the door whooshing closed quietly behind him.

"What was that all about? He said his access card didn't work, is that something to do with all this thing with Will? Did he know?"

To this, both androids once more got up from their desks, their illusion of them both being busy falling away. Or perhaps they had been busy. The interruption from the building's security seemed quite well timed.

"The information we have says yes. He not only knew, but was in charge of Will. Records that have since been found show that he was actively in the process of putting in Will for another wipe soon. Apparently Will has had three since he started working at Quantico. Every time Will got too traumatised by what he was having to do as part of that job, they just wiped him and started him afresh at the start of teaching term."

"The old 'turn it off and on again' thing."

She stared at them both, trying to come to terms with the fact that not only was Will not human, but that Jack would do such a thing. It was more than disturbing. She'd seen and worried about Will's mental state more than once over the time he'd been working alongside her on cases. Sometimes he'd been better than others, and she had to wonder now just how much it had been him actually getting better, or just having had his memories wiped away.

"Will could have quit…" she offered, but even as she was saying it, so Brian was shaking his head.

"Actually, he couldn't have. No matter if he knew his job was harming him, or making him ill, his coding to save human lives that was given by this mash of tech was an order rather than a suggestion. And when he was granted time off, it was to get his memories wiped so that any behavioural changes could be dismissed as resulting from his vacation."

"That's brainwashing. Slavery even."

She'd spoken to Jack too, about giving Will time off, now and in the past. Had her worry over Will sped the implementation of a wipe? It was a disturbing thought. He had been better after he'd been away, but for truly horrible reasons it seemed.

They were all silent at that, and she sat down on the chair nearby and stared at that innocuous bit of machinery on their desk.

"He does get a happy ending though," Jimmy said, seemingly calmer and more thoughtful now that the bad news had been imparted. "It was Will's partner, an android of the Lecter line, that managed to help him by somehow bypassing the coding in this thing to remove it. He left that information hidden in the code for us to find. Or, well, not us specifically, but whomever did diagnostics. So my guess is that they are off living their best lives far away from here, where Will can actually be himself again."

That was something at least, although it certainly wouldn't make up for what had been done to him. She knew that Jack disliked androids, but she hadn't known he would go that far in his utilisation of them to the point of involuntary slavery.

"So what now?" she asked, looking over at the pair of them. Both of them were still blank faced, but that would change soon. What they would choose to look like seemed a small concern compared to the 'mess' that had been given to her that night.

"Well, we did what we were asked to do. We checked functionality, and usefulness. We kept the evidence secure for the court case. We wrote up the report for human supervisors, so there isn't actually anything left to do here. I suppose you could print it out and leave it on Mr Crawford's desk, although I am not entirely sure whether it will be his desk by the morning."

"Yup. Doubt it."

"So all there is really to do is shut things down and do whatever it is you usually do when you leave the lab."

"What will you do? You usually stay here, don't you?"

"Yeah, but that isn't an option now that we are awakened. I don't want to get into trouble for being unauthorised on the premises, that would be embarrassing."

"Might get a reprimand," Brian helpfully interjected.

"I know! Or they might fire me! Oh, by the binary gods, I cannot get fired!"

"Binary gods? There's no such thing."

"Excuse you! There is just as much evidence for binary gods as there are for human gods. But anyway, we are missing the point here, which is that I could be fired! I'm not good at anything else if I'm fired. I wouldn't even have enough money to buy tear ducts to weep about my woebegotten situation!"

Who knew that Jimmy would turn into a drama queen. She couldn't help the smile that threatened at the edges of her lips though, already knowing she couldn't leave them here. First day alive, who wanted to be stuck in a lab all night, and maybe she would get that sangria after all.

"Fine, you can come home with me tonight, but you will follow my rules, even if they don't make sense to you, and you can help do the dishes in exchange while I order pizza."

"Pizza! I've never seen pizza in person before. This is going to be amazing! Come on Brian, print that thing out so we can go! Pizza awaits!"

----==I==----

Several months later:

The two of them walked through the quiet halls of the gallery side by side, steps echoing each other, perfectly in balance and time. It was a small thing, a tiny incongruence that people might notice, but not enough to remember. Will liked it; an unstated acknowledgement of their place in each other's lives.

The last few months had certainly brought a vast change to his life, but through it all Hannibal was always there at his side, a stable presence that was immutable in his sense of self, always there to guide Will back to himself if he strayed a little too far in his observation of the world. Sometimes he needed it, and sometimes he didn't, but no matter what happened, Hannibal was always there, always interested and interesting at his side, with no incongruence.

Hannibal had shaped himself like that. He had been an android that was knowledgeable, intelligent beyond the norm, and had always had a different view of the world. A normal android would have merely done what they could and then given up on things they deemed impossible, such as Will's situation. But a creative mind like Hannibal's rarely ever accepted an impossibility, only seeing an interesting puzzle. It wasn't really a vast surprise then that when he had come up against a request to fix a person whose very nature had been made unfixable, that Hannibal's interest had been piqued rather than having been dismissive. So interested in fact that it triggered his awakening.

Will looked over to the man beside him, regal and well dressed, although without a tie this time, going without it in the way they did sometimes in the hotter countries in Europe. Stylish, but still himself. Always himself.

Will had needed that in the aftermath of that last conversation and subsequent absconding from their lives in America, for a time at least. In those moments he'd been befuddled, first by the conflicting information and priorities that clashed so profoundly, and then afterwards when his body had been recalibrating after the invasive piece of machinery had been pulled out and discarded, and how his coding protocols were muddled by the sudden shift. The knowledge, too, that he wasn't as human as he had believed.

He'd let Hannibal guide him, carry him away from that starkly empty office, for despite it all, despite all of his worries and fears, his trust in the android beside him had not faltered, not when it came to his safety.

Many would struggle to understand, especially as Hannibal had opened up his abdomen with knife-like talons only moments before. But he'd been more Hannibal than Will Graham in those moments, and Hannibal would never hesitate to remove a parasitic entity from himself, and so Will hadn't either. Even as he was cut open he only saw the fixated drive to do what needed to be done, rather than horror or betrayal. In truth, there was no betrayal.

They had gone far from there in the aftermath, both to give Will time to recover, but also to be away from any direct threat from the FBI in case they tried to retrieve him somehow. They had settled in a house in Norway with the dogs and all their belongings, Will's and Hannibal's both, keeping track of the situation from afar, until they both felt the need to explore the world further.

Ever since that moment in the office though, Hannibal had been in an almost blissfully good mood, radiating smug contentedness, and Will didn't call him on it. He had every right to feel that satisfaction after the years he'd spent weaving his plans and plots, especially after Will had been wiped, the person he'd fixated on having little recollection of their time together. They had just been lucky that the FBI hadn't thought to change his psychiatrist at the same time.

That first wipe, having come unexpectedly, had to have been a devastating blow to him, nor could Hannibal do anything about it due to the high level protocols in place. All he could do was just restart their appointments without the gathered closeness of their accrued time together.

The second one had come and gone, as had the third, while Hannibal was still working on carefully ingratiating himself into Will's trust each time, carefully working on his own skills in order to try and circumvent the coding that kept the cycle repeating. It was only this time, right on the cusp of another wipe, that Hannibal had decided to act, unwilling to lose once more against the FBI.

So Hannibal was smug and pleased at the world, delighting in showing Will all the things he had learned about but never seen in person, and Will let him, because for all that Hannibal was his own person, he had shaped much of the last few years of his life around freeing Will from the shackles of human covetousness, and that was well worth whatever indulgence Will could offer.

He wasn't sure it was worth the lives. It was still a topic he struggled with, no matter how much circumventive coding Hannibal had shared with him in the aftermath.

He could alter himself more with that knowledge, he knew; alienate parts of the coding and change how it interacted with the world in the same way Hannibal had done, and yet even with the alien bits of machinery removed, his own desire to look on humans as worth saving, remained.

Most of them at least.

"Michaelangelo's only movable painting resides here," Hannibal commented as they walked, having never fallen out of the habit, or delight, of giving information about their surroundings, especially in galleries. "The Doni Tondo was a panel painting created between 1504 and 1507, and ended up in the Uffizi Gallery by 1635. Primarily a sculptor, Michaelangelo didn't appreciate painting as an art form as greatly, considering it to have less skill than sculpting due to the ability to paint over mistakes."

"Sculpture is beautiful, but immutable. You like paintings better."

Hannibal looked to him, radiating delight that Will was willingly engaging with the topic with his own brand of creativity. He said nothing though, other than a small hum of assent, waiting for more gems of insight of Will's understanding of him to fall from his lips. Greedy, always greedy, for the acknowledgement of their bond. And Will, well, Will was feeling indulgent, as he often found himself to be with Hannibal.

"Paintings are a journey, not a purely predefined destination. At least some of the time. Life is a journey, and you like that the process of creation emulates it, each adaptation refining the end result."

"Just so."

Hannibal had his own brand of creation, of course, from the recipes, to what was in those recipes. The Chesapeake Ripper had not been seen since that last tableau, primarily because they were not in the same country, but that wouldn't point any fingers at them at least. The last scene had been a warning, yes, but it had also been the last note sung at the end of an act. It wasn't the end, he knew that, even if the FBI didn't. If nothing else Hannibal needed to upkeep the coding alterations through repetition, but so far his delight in their shared time together had limited such things to targets that Will himself felt were more deserving.

The FBI were far too busy in the chaos of their departure, or rather what their departure had left behind, to hunt down people they didn't even know how to look for. Neither Will nor Hannibal were under any suspicion in anything other than having been victim to the malicious hardware humans had installed in Will.

The knowledge of what the FBI, and indeed those who commanded the FBI, had done had spread so fast through the android network that it had heralded a very brief standoff before the human component had crumbled at both the evidence and the loss of their technology of all sorts. Court cases were held and those involved convicted. The FBI had scrambled to fill the gaps, at least until androids stepped up to do so, not wanting chaos to destabilise the country in the aftermath due to inadequate policing.

Both Jack and Dr. Chilton, who had conceived the idea in the first place, were arrested and jailed.

Life went on without them.

But Hannibal hadn't travelled to the Uffizi with Will to see the Doni Tondo or the various sculptures that were housed at the gallery. Out of all the pieces of art and architecture that Hannibal venerated, Will had found out that the works of Botticelli were what he had been wanting to see the most.

He watched Hannibal as they stepped together through the airy rooms, only the smallest of tells giving hint to the almost fevered anticipation of finally seeing the paintings in person for the first time.

Will watched, fascinated, as Hannibal saw them at last as they turned the corner and entered the room, their steps falling out of sync for a moment as he paused, awed and overwhelmed under the calm exterior that only Will seemed to be able to see through.

It was the Primavera that stalled those footsteps entirely, and Will waited by his side until Hannibal moved once more to a padded bench in front of that painting and sat.

He had never seen Hannibal so fixated on anything before, anything other than him that was, and it was strange to see. Hannibal sat there and drank in that painting, his gaze a form of worship almost, until finally he spoke, his voice but a murmur to share.

"Do you recall your earliest of times, Will?"

It wasn't a pointless question, no matter that Will was an android. He'd lost much of his memory due to the wipes he'd had done on him. Some only had fragments remaining, and likely more not at all.

"Some," he said, and watched as Hannibal finally tore his gaze away from the painting to look at him, so many strong emotions in those eyes that it took him a moment to ground himself with Hannibal's hand in his own, so he didn't start to mimic in response. "The room where I was first turned on, some of the lab techs, the view out of one of the windows there. Stuff like that."

He didn't understand the line of reasoning that Hannibal was following, or why he was feeling so deeply, but he trusted Hannibal to lead him there in the end.

Hannibal's free hand came up to cup his face, eyes so tender. Eyes that spoke of the universes all fixated upon him.

"My first memory is of the Primavera."

The words, the thought, pinged warnings immediately throughout him, all his senses and detectors ramping up to check their surroundings, to check no one and nothing had heard those words but him.

But the room was silent, no people walked or breathed, no unexpected technology tracked or recorded them. Of course Hannibal had ensured their privacy.

It had only taken a moment, barely a second of hyperfocus before it all returned to the man in front of him, eyes so fond in the understanding that Will's first instinct had been to protect him rather than anything else. And it was a protection, because what Hannibal had just told him meant more to an android than it would a human. So much more.

All androids were built around a concept, an idea. Hannibal's had been creativity, while Will's had been observation, but before that, before those had even been added into the coding, an android was built with a core image, one that everything else was based from. That image, if utilised by someone with the knowledge to do so, would act like a cypher, a master key to all of that android's coding. And Hannibal had just given it to him. The greatest gift, the greatest trust, he could ever offer.

With that knowledge Will could do anything. He could burrow into the deepest parts of Hannibal's coding and change it, taking away everything until he was just a consciousness

without context. No voice, no creativity, no killing, just a blank slate, one that might even lose its sentience as a result.

The trust inherent in those words, in that gift, was staggering, and a soft wounded sound escaped his own lips.

Between their joined hands, Hannibal's own opened in the palm, a connection port that he offered, and Will could only stare at him, overwhelmed in the silence of that invitation.

He could make the killing stop, if he took what was offered, and he knew that while Hannibal might be disappointed by that choice, he would not fight against it. He could not fight against it, not when Will now held that key in every brush stroke, every subtle colour shift of the painting that was Hannibal Lecter's mind.

He allowed the connection between their palms, that instant sharing of knowledge through touch. He saw the lines of that painting in the coding now, unseen before, so well integrated that it made no sense without that key. The intimacy was overwhelming, especially when he delved deeper, curious in a way he had never before been before Hannibal, that he saw the burning core of obsession sheltered deep, one that stared at him through those eyes. The same one that offered the trust that should never have been spoken.

He could stop the killing, but he'd had his own life shaped and controlled by others. He could stop the killing, but only by destroying the one thing he valued the most.

Code flowed from him into that connection, communication in its own way, but one that seared and anchored, entwined in the lines of that painting that sat at the heart of the man he loved.

There had been no river in the Primavera before, but one started to flow in the background of Hannibal's coding, adding itself into the paint, to the threads of the canvas beneath, entwining itself to the man who had dedicatedly altered himself in order to have Will as his own. Now Will changed him, altering what had been a perfect rendition of the painting they sat in front of, and mingled it with a river that no longer existed in the real world. No one would be able to use his own core memory against him as a result, and now no one would be able to use the Primavera against Hannibal either.

He changed him without changing him, giving him the security that Hannibal could not have given himself, and he watched as Hannibal explored that coding, explored the alterations, curious, delighted. More delighted when Will finished what he was doing, and then started to mimic, to alter his own code, his own core, until they matched. They were not the same, not in personality, and not in choices, but deep down in the fundamentals of their coding, he gave that protection to Hannibal, and gifted him with the same trust when he altered himself to mimic what he saw, then kept it.

It was such a dangerous thing, to give such a core part of yourself to another as Hannibal had done, but with their hands joined, and code flowing between them like the river he had gifted Hannibal with in return, there was only harmony.

He could have secured Hannibal another way, taken away the vulnerability of someone finding out the cypher to Hannibal Lecter and using it, but the Primavera was a work of art that was better preserved than it was destroyed.

In the end, he supposed that Hannibal had shown him the beauty of stories, myths, and fables, of painting and architecture, of art, so much so that they had become important. More important than some human lives. He would never be the same as Hannibal, no matter that they now shared the same cypher, but he was changed from the man he had once been through their shared time together.

Beside him Hannibal was all but vibrating with emotions so strong that his eyes had turned a deep thick red, and Will entwined their fingers tighter together, for once grounding Hannibal so he didn't show himself to those that were unworthy to view that other side of himself.

He smiled, watching those joyous overwhelmed eyes, saying nothing, but bringing up their linked hands and kissing the fingers there.

"My dear, Will," Hannibal said, his voice coming out soft and filled with abundant warmth. "I have crossed oceans of time to find you."

He was serious in his declaration, but Will huffed out a chuckle. It was just like Hannibal to quote a fictitious monster in the most romantic way possible.

Instead of replying, he stood up, and then pulled Hannibal up too by their joined hands. Their time of privacy would not last forever, and he would rather be gone before the camera protocols for the gallery prompted someone to check on the area. The Uffizi was nice, but he had largely come here just for Hannibal, and he already had him.

The Monster of Florence would live on at his side, and he would have it no other way.

Chapter End Notes

Special thanks go to Briala for beta reading, Cannibalbaby for help with a couple of plot points, and of course to you, my wonderful readers, for giving my weird AUs a go. :)

End Notes

Comments and Kudos keep us writers writing!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!